

## Introduction

### The Global Gita

Once upon a time, the world's longest and arguably its greatest epic, the Mahabharata, was written down. It contains a compendium of myriad types of human beings, from the sublime to the grotesque, the wise to the ridiculous, almost as if it were a summary of all life on Earth intended for the cosmic library at the center of the universe.

Nestled right on the verge of the titanic war forming a major climax of the epic is a jewel of wisdom that puts the entire panoply in perspective. Lifted out of its context it has come to be known as the Bhagavad Gita, the Song of the Guru. A guru is that which removes the darkness of ignorance, and the dawning of the light of understanding is the sweetest song of all. The Bhagavad Gita—fondly referred to simply as the Gita—is nothing more or less than a textbook of enlightenment applicable to all humanity, bestowed by the great teachers of old, who were called *rishis*.

Nothing is known for certain about the origins of the Bhagavad Gita. Linguistic analysis points to the written version appearing somewhere around the first century CE, but it is obviously taken from a far older oral tradition. An astounding amount of philosophical ferment peaked around 500 BCE, with Buddha and Mahavira's Jainism, and the Gita speaks to it as a contemporary. After hundreds of years as spoken wisdom it was gathered together in written form by an anonymous author, more or less as we know it today. The author is traditionally referred to as Vyasa, a word meaning simply compiler or editor

While few scriptures have enjoyed—or suffered from—as many explications and commentaries as the Gita has, the work is perhaps more mysterious today than it was when it first appeared. This is partly due to the subject matter itself, and not to any limitation of the minds that have lent themselves to the task. The meaning of life, epitomized in terms like God or the Absolute, is

an eternal mystery, not a fact, and as such will defy description for all eternity. But the attempt to pin meaning down does throw light on it, light which can improve and illuminate our lives. At the same time, the wildly misleading ideas that have sprung up have obscured the intended meaning like a jungle engulfing an ancient temple. Periodically it is essential to hack away the undergrowth.

Most Gita commentaries pursue a religious tack or deal in abstruse and outdated philosophies. Some even assume that the Gita was originally written to present the very detritus of orthodox beliefs that have grown up around it. Not at all! The material itself rejects orthodoxy in no uncertain terms, defining itself clearly as an absolutist mystical text. Unearthing its buried wisdom is the goal of the present commentary. The intention is to present the work stripped of all excess, so that it can touch those who wish to benefit from the application of its very practical wisdom.

## The Overall Plot of the Gita

The setting is meant to evoke our eternal dilemma as human beings, which is to be confronted with intense and often paradoxical challenges. The Gita begins on the brink of an all-out war between the forces of good and evil. Krishna is Prince Arjuna's chariot driver, and they are about to enter the fray, but as the battle cry is sounded Arjuna is overcome with doubts. He is conflicted between his duty as a warrior and his kindly instincts as a human being, and he asks Krishna to help him sort them out. They turn to each other right in the middle of the chaos and begin to probe the meaning of life. After an in-depth study and self-analysis lasting for the entire eighteen chapters of the Gita, Arjuna's doubts are eradicated and his enthusiasm for life is restored. We know that later in the epic Arjuna rejoins the battle, but the Gita ends on the note of Krishna insisting that it is up to Arjuna what to do. He has become capable of making his own decisions wisely and well. It would spoil the case if those decisions were spelled out for him in any way.

There is a tendency to view a scripture like the Bhagavad Gita as a system of worship or practice, and therefore exclusive and forbidding to outsiders, and many commentators play up this angle. In fact it is a guided technique for paring away the misconceptions that are impediments to a fully realized and enjoyable life. It is supremely open, especially in the interpretation presented here. There are no requirements—only an invitation to learn and grow on your own terms and in your own way. No one is an outsider, although most of us feel like one, because we are separated from our authentic nature. There is no hierarchy here, only seekers of truth and joy making their way through the endless miracle of the universe.

The philosophy of yoga presented by the Gita invites us to extricate ourselves from a dysfunctional life in a dysfunctional society, in order to investigate how to live with a fresh and empowered attitude. It is to be read as a guidebook for personal transformation, where Arjuna is meant to stand for each and every one of us. Each verse is to be brought home in a practical fashion. It's not about other people's faults, or establishing a fixed cosmology. It does not tell us how to live, but how to learn to live.

The Gita is the product of a loose confederation of intelligent and intense contemplatives informally pooling their best ideas, later gathered together by a mastermind and presented almost as a fable. It consists of 700 aphoristic verses in eighteen chapters, with nothing superfluous whatsoever. There is no vengeful God in it, only a benign and loving principle, called *brahman*, or the Absolute. It is replete with the finest spiritual advice tendered without compunction or guilt. As Krishna himself says, every person approaches truth from their own unique perspective, and that is just how it should be. Moreover, every being is equally precious. There are no chosen and cursed souls, only more or less damaged and confused ones. The game here is to rectify the damage and dispel the confusion with clear thinking and action. Doing so is its own reward, revealing our vast potential that has

long been neglected. We imagine we are little men and women, but that is because we know almost nothing about ourselves.

The heroic element in the Gita is a hint that we have learned to be timid and deferential, but those attitudes, while adequate for social interactions, have cut us off from our own strength of character, which is capable of taking us to the highest expression of excellence. Deference means being motivated by others; heroism means being self-motivated and resolute. In learning from the Gita we have to find and express our own inner motivation.

### Why the Gita is Set on a Battlefield

Sometime in their lives, often in their forties and fifties, many people go through a crisis. Whether precipitated by a traumatic event or not, previously accepted notions of right conduct no longer provide them with a feeling of security. Trusted beliefs are revealed to be empty promises. In that moment they are unsure where they stand, broken free as they are from long-cherished supports. The abruptness between their awareness and the social order can be extremely painful, and occasionally their anguish makes them brave enough to challenge the predominant paradigm, if only briefly. They flail about, trying to sweep back the cobwebs of outmoded habits. Decisions taken during this period of heightened intensity will have repercussions for the remainder of their lives. Arjuna stands for anyone who finds themselves at such a crossroads.

While such a crisis is a crucial first step in recovery for individuals who have bartered away their freedom to the surrounding social reality, many are convinced they are abnormal for simply having this experience. Despite being a critical stage of personal development, there is little approbation for it in the workaday world. This usually leads to further self-doubt, followed by a sheepish return to the fold. Accommodation with an unsympathetic world can be eased by any number of compromises. Some indulge in wild behavior and partying. Others redouble their

efforts in work, drowning their sorrows in activity. Still others become pious religious devotees, and learn to tolerate misery as a prelude to a better life after death. Many are secretly and bitterly disillusioned, and live out their lives as timid spectators rather than participants. There are many alternatives through which to suppress the self, with those rocking the boat least being the most acceptable to their fellows, caught as they are in the same existential conflict.

But there is a road less traveled, and it offers the healthiest alternative of all: intelligent contemplation of the self to break the chains of habit, allowing the individual to connect with and fulfill their optimum capabilities. Those who take this road are among the revered souls who have exceptional impact on their world. They become wise teachers, effective transformers of society, revolutionary artists, inventive scientists, loving friends to all. Many are drawn to them by a sort of magnetic attraction that awakens their own dormant longing for liberation. Humanity's richness can be measured in such people. Without them our collective spiritual poverty would be immeasurable.

## The Subject Matter

The Bhagavad Gita is particularly beneficial for those who feel trapped in their lives. Spiritual liberation calls to those who feel a deep-seated urge to break the bonds of their humdrum daily existence and reawaken their lost sense of aliveness.

As Rousseau so eloquently put it, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." Inside each of us is the original free spirit that once was born into a loving and unfettered existence but rapidly was forced to compromise it away. Sooner or later troubles set in, sometimes as early as the womb. Whenever the struggles begin we are compelled to respond, so that sooner or later that gentle core is overlaid with layer upon layer of offenses and duties, held in place by fear. By the time we become adults, our original state of paradise has become almost entirely a vestigial,

unconscious memory. Many of us feel utterly oppressed by our obligations to family, work and society. This can grow into an unhealthy condition approaching desperation.

Such is the state we find Arjuna in as the Gita opens. Like most of us, his first impulse is to run away to shelter. Some of us run to other places, most run to psychological hideouts, but ultimately there is no place to hide. We all develop some kind of mask to hide our true feelings. Arjuna wants to become the kind of person who doesn't have to deal with the situation in which he finds himself. But he is extremely lucky—if it is only luck—to have a guru already standing at his side, who can lead him to the most satisfying resolution of his predicament.

Krishna's first piece of advice is to stop being afraid and trying to escape, and to face the situation squarely. He then unfolds a wisdom teaching that reconnects Arjuna with his true inner nature, his forgotten core, on which basis a free and expert life again becomes possible.

Everywhere, children in adult bodies go about their lives, guarded and worried, desperately trying to follow vaguely grasped laws and internalized exhortations. All Krishna is really asking of Arjuna is that he grow up. The Gita is in a sense a rite of passage tale, in which an adult human being is born. Arjuna is an obedient boy who has outgrown his subservience, and wants to discover what it means to be everything it is possible for him to be. Krishna deftly shows him who he is (and who he isn't), how he fits into the universal context, gives him some useful advice, and sets him free to follow his own star.

An adult should be able to act independently, with as much free will as possible. Independence and freedom overlap to a large extent. But the vast majority never grow out of the habit of doing other peoples' bidding, often without even realizing it. Or they reject outside interference and spend their energy acting contrary to what is expected of them. Both these ploys are bound to the

status quo. Only someone who can stand above both attitudes at once is able to experiment in the area of unfettered activity.

The human race is capable of greatness, but is hobbled by systems that prevent individuals from maturing beyond their early roles as submissive children. Religion often becomes the substitute parent after the child leaves home. No wonder so many long for the return of a messiah, worship a king, or vote for a leader who promises to take care of them. Who among us even wishes to be independent, let alone strives for it? It's all too rare.

Part of the thrill of studying the Bhagavad Gita is the reawakening of all the suppressed parts of us that are dying to have a chance to be expressed. It's the call of our inner being to be let out of its socially constructed cage. Our best contribution to the world and our own well-being is to extricate ourselves from our psychic prison. We can hardly imagine the heights humanity is capable of attaining if it was comprised of independent, sovereign, thoughtful adults.

### Why This Book is Needed

The Gita is a textbook of liberation. Yet when asked about its central message, most people—including most commentators—would say it's all about duty: learning what your duty is and carrying it out. God is assigning you a specific role and your duty is to conform to it. Nothing could be more opposed to the Gita's intent. That kind of thinking undermines the value of everything Krishna teaches.

The work begins on a note of self-doubt, and its culmination is the restoration of full confidence based on self-knowledge. It is a false interpretation that the Gita recommends adherence to duty as the means to recover this confidence. That would be like a psychiatrist recommending a better-crafted social mask or persona in order to cope with the world, or prescribing a drug to suppress the symptoms. The Gita, like a responsible therapist, aims to restore the connection with our true inner identity, which

necessitates extrication from all outside obligations and duties, at least theoretically. Only a thoroughgoing inner expertise based in freedom can induce the confidence to live without crutches.

Indian thought distinguishes between *shruti* and *smriti*, between wisdom received directly from a guru or other authentic source, and a compendium of obligatory duties and moral instruction. The Gita was born as a *shruti*, but has been downgraded into a *smriti* by generations of misguided enthusiasts. It is to rescue this sublime treasure of liberating wisdom from such degradation that this commentary has been undertaken.

The Gita was originally written down in Sanskrit, an allusive language in which a vast amount of information is transmitted with poetic economy. By its very breadth, which opens the door to a wide range of possible interpretations, Sanskrit brings the reader in as a full partner in the learning process. My guru's own teacher, Nataraja Guru, electrified the world of Gita commentary with his own scientifically-minded interpretation in 1961, and his book has been continuously in print in India ever since. In his translation, which is the one used in this book, he has done an admirable job of maintaining its allusions, and I have changed only a very few words of his version. My comments are examples of the kind of meditative expansion that any student of the Gita is expected to make as they study the work, fleshing out the bare bones with resonant insights.

## Yoga

A special technique of the Gita is to unify all polarizations, inwardly and outwardly, in what is called *yoga*. The Gita is in fact a training manual of how to unite conflicting elements in yoga. When opposites are united, a transcendental understanding emerges. Throughout the Gita concepts are masterfully paired with their opposite, so that while each may be contemplated in isolation,

uniting them comprehensibly is seen to be the essence of yogic practice.

The Western concept of simple dialectics is virtually identical to yoga. In it a proposition and its opposite, known as thesis and antithesis, are brought together to create a synthesis. The synthesis is greater than the sum of its parts, in fact, *much* greater. Nataraja Guru taught that dialectics reveals the Absolute, or the essential core of every situation. The term dialectics is frequently used in this commentary to emphasize the reciprocal aspect of yoga and the importance of synthesizing contradictory elements.

The rational methodology is to scrutinize each particle of existence in isolation, which is fine as far as it goes. But in doing so the context is easily lost. Yoga restores the context, by discerning the relationship between the separate items. It is like the wave aspect of the particles: related items move in harmonious patterns and exhibit reciprocity. Science itself has begun moving in this direction also. The study of emergence parallels dialectical synthesis, where unanticipated behavior emerges from complex interactions of component parts.

Reciprocity depends on an inner connection between apparently disparate elements, which has puzzled philosophers down through the ages. It is immediately clear to everyone that up has no meaning without down, bad has no meaning without good, and so on. These factors are therefore *relative* to each other, in that more up means less down, and so on. Reciprocity resembles a teeter-totter, which requires the ends being connected on a single pole, and also to have an independently fixed—albeit hypothetical—fulcrum for the system to operate on.

Logically, then, some connection must be present between opposite poles, but where is it to be found? This inner coherence is provided by the supreme value of the Absolute as the fulcrum, which is more commonly called a universal ground or ground of being. This approach is rejected by rationalist philosophers because of a tendency to insist on the visible proof of horizontal factors, while an absolute ground must necessarily be outside the

limits of sensory experience. Historically, the great Indian gurus have had no such false modesty. They realized that if there is no inherent connection between polar factors, any assertion of their relative merit is arbitrary and thus false. But by postulating the Absolute as that which unites opposites in the equation, values immediately become not only possible but natural.

The quest of the yogi is to intelligently attain the state of perfect mental equipoise through acceptance of valid relations and rejection of false ones. A lot of turmoil is brought about when, for instance, good is taken for divine and bad is rejected as diabolical. It divides the psyche against itself in a highly corrosive manner, since what is good for one person may be bad for their neighbor. Much of the conflict of human life is directly traceable to being attracted to half of a polarity while rejecting the other half. It explains, among other things, why good intentions so often go wrong. The entire dynamic of every situation must be comprehended before expertise in action can be achieved.

## Guru and Disciple

Being dissociated from our true nature and living beneath a social mask breeds a permanent state of negativity ranging from anxiety to profound depression. Our inner disquiet is often veiled by a compensation in which a part of us becomes our own caretaker, competent and seemingly well adjusted. Outwardly, we appear “in charge,” but beneath the surface calm is an anxious soul, cut off from its connection with its own being. Thinking our way through life instead of allowing it to unfold naturally, we have a visceral sense that something profound has been lost but we don’t know what it is. Such a compromised existence works adequately until a crisis reveals its limitations. Then the emptiness of our persona is shockingly revealed. Suddenly we desperately need to know what’s missing in our life. If we are fortunate to find it—and it is always within us, waiting to be found—we will begin to fulfill our potential. Luckily, there are a few who have already

reconnected with themselves who are willing to help, and they are often right nearby just at the moment we are ready to turn to them. We call them gurus.

A guru is a representative spark of the Absolute itself, whose guidance restores the seeker to wholeness. In the Gita a sublime guru, Krishna, helps a baffled disciple, Arjuna, to restore the dynamism of his own nature from out of the desert of conditioning he has become trapped in. Reawakening life through reconnection with our authentic self is the Gita's dominant theme, and it offers some novel strategies to attain that aptitude.

The spiritual dynamic of guru and disciple is a most excellent example of yoga dialectics, where as individuals they are a thesis and antithesis, and as they come together in an osmotic exchange they achieve a transcendent synthesis. The guru elicits the best capabilities of the disciple, and the disciple's probing questions prompt the guru to shed new light precisely where it is needed. Their coming together is dependent on mutual trust. The synthesis this produces is described in the eleventh chapter, where Arjuna attains a direct vision of the nature of reality. His mind is so stretched by the experience that Krishna will spend the final seven chapters helping him to adjust to it.

Krishna is a human being, but in the reverential attitude of India a guru is also a living incarnation of the Absolute, the supreme principle, that which leaves nothing out. In Vedanta—the philosophical system of the Gita and its close cousins, the Upanishads—everyone and all things are the Absolute in essence, and the seeker's path, such as it is, is to come to know this truth. It is a path that begins and ends right where we are.

The Gita maintains it is within everyone's reach to renew their life at the level of creativity, through ever-new, joyous participation in the torrent of viable expression welling up within them. You do not need to slip into abject misery before heeding Krishna's call to come awake once more. At whatever point you realize you are slipping out of communion with your true self, you

just bring yourself back. As a regular exercise this restores life to its innate exuberance.

It is helpful to keep in mind that the true guru is a principle and not necessarily a person. A guru—literally a remover of darkness—is a teacher, but each of us is guided by the totality of our surroundings in this benign universe. Sometimes that takes the form of a human being, but the guru appears in whatever way the next stage of learning occurs. Often seekers will open a book chosen at random, start to read at random, and find the words speak directly to their current problem. Or they will sit by a stream and listen to the rush of water, and suddenly have an insight into how to proceed with a difficult situation. Nowadays they might be stuck in traffic and have their revelation there. Whatever. The outer condition is eliciting our inner truth, our intuition, in a million ways, if we only allow ourselves to be open to it.

Where the original idea is to promote human unity with the cosmos, scriptures are often interpreted to exalt certain individuals and reinforce the widespread conviction that liberation is only for one single rare and exceptional person who lived in the distant past. That means there is no possibility of freedom for the rest of us without divine intervention on our behalf, or the miraculous return of that special person. The Gita is frequently cited to promulgate Krishna in such a role, and doing so totally undermines its most important tenet: that the Absolute is inherent in everyone and accessible to all who seek it.

## The Absolute

The Absolute is a philosophically rigorous term that has fallen on hard times due to linguistic confusion, but is centrally important in Indian thought. It sums up the unitive position that all is one, and is used in place of more limited terms like God or nature because it is impeccably neutral, whereas there is always a temptation to imagine some things are not God, for instance, or are abhorrent to nature.

Absolutism, which is another matter entirely, has given the Absolute a bad name. Absolutism is when a political belief is considered to be absolute and its acceptance is forced on everyone. Where the Absolute is all-inclusive, absolutism is harshly exclusive. A seeker of truth must clearly distinguish these two utterly different principles with similar names.

Despite the postulation of an Absolute, which keeps consciousness properly oriented and is common to all systems, whether philosophical, religious, or scientific, there is no such thing as absolute realization. Anything realized has to be relative, less than the whole, which means there is no absolute right or wrong, or any last word. Whenever the mind goes beyond its accustomed boundaries, it undergoes an expansion that feels like liberation or realization, but no one has yet ascertained any end to human potential. Greater expansion is a perennial possibility.

Because of this, there is always more to be discovered. Once we realize that our knowledge is inevitably partial, we will know that learning never ends and there is no ultimate panacea. Anyone claiming finalized answers is in fact seriously deluded, and is most likely intending to manipulate others for their personal benefit. In any case the idea of finality brings growth to a halt.

If the Absolute is imagined to be a fixed item that can be disdained or rejected, it is not the Absolute. Nataraja Guru emphasized this frequently, asserting, “The notion of the Absolute has somehow to transcend all paradox, and even vestiges suggestive of it. This is an utterly necessary position, epistemologically speaking. Ultimate truth cannot be thought of as having a rival or be ranged against itself.” (Unitive Philosophy, 79-80)

Because of the confusion, let’s set forth a definition, from the Collier-Macmillan *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

The Absolute is a term used by philosophers to signify the ultimate reality regarded as one and yet as the source of variety; as complete, or perfect, and yet as not divorced from the finite,

imperfect world. The term was introduced into the philosophical vocabulary at the very end of the eighteenth century by Schelling and Hegel....

In 1803...Schelling argues that philosophy, as concerned with first principles, must be “an absolute science,” that it is therefore concerned with what is absolute, and that, since all things are conditioned, philosophy must be concerned with the activity of knowing, rather than things or objects.

“Philosophy,” he writes, “is the science of the Absolute,” and the Absolute is the identity of the act of knowledge and what is known. Schelling gives the name “Absolute Idealism” to the philosophy in which this identity is recognized. The exponent of Absolute Idealism, he argues, seeks out the intelligence that is necessarily embodied in nature, and he achieves by means of “intellectual intuition” a grasp of the identity between knower and known.

Indian philosophy predates these Western philosophers by at least two millennia, but the concept is identical.

The central claim of Vedantic philosophy, as presented in the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads, is that each and every person is a manifestation of the Absolute, and our challenge is to come to remember that truth in a world where objects and events constantly distract us from it, often even intentionally. This not only gives us unlimited hope, it empowers us to do our best. We are accorded the highest possible respect in advance. If everyone and everything is sacred, then there is no possibility of sacrilege. We have no need for divine intervention, because we are already miraculous. Life is a continuous “divine intervention,” so what more could be needed?

For this reason, students of Indian wisdom are instructed to meditate that they are the Absolute and the Absolute is everything. Seekers start out imagining the goal exists somewhere else, so they are not realized, are not worthy, and so on. Remote goals are all fictions that evaporate under scrutiny.

Narayana Guru (1854-1928), South India's preeminent seer and revelator of ancient wisdom in the modern age, taught that to know that the wave and ocean are not two separate things is the goal of spiritual search. The starting point of our search is usually to imagine God or the Absolute as separate from the world. The truth of the matter is that they are the very nature of existence. Realizing this is all that matters, but it's far more than an intellectual exercise. It has to become a living reality at every moment. That takes a little digging for most of us.

Sadly, many of us are so brainwashed and have forgotten who we are so thoroughly that we shy away from even the prospect of seeking for our true nature. Instead of daring to be our cosmic selves, we have learned to reduce our expectations to just making the best of a bad situation. To restore our normal courage the rishis—the gurus of old—recommend meditating on the phrase *tat tvam asi*, “The Absolute is what I am.”

Keeping in mind that anything that has an opposite is not the Absolute, it cannot be said that the Absolute is big or small. Obviously, if we define the Absolute as unknowable and indefinable, and we equate truth with it, then truth is going to come in as indefinite and unknowable. Curiously, the claim of Vedanta is that we CAN know the Absolute, via mystical intuition and surrendering our partial vision for an overwhelming participation in the whole. Many spiritual traditions offer the assurance that such an experience is valid, not delusory. We are invited to judge for ourselves.

## The Arch Shape

Visualizing the Gita as an arch is a helpful analogy. Placing the rounded arch of the Gita in the middle of a horizontal line representing normal life produces a shape resembling the Greek omega:  $\Omega$ . Transactional orientation comprises the horizontal aspect of life while timeless wisdom and ideals epitomize the

vertical. Their intermixing in varying proportions produces the curvature of the arch.

Horizontal and vertical factors are implicitly demonstrated in the course of the Gita by the fact that at the beginning and the end the focus is primarily on Arjuna and his predicament, while in the middle Krishna is spoken of almost exclusively. As Arjuna moves toward the vertical he is more and more drawn into the wonder of the Absolute and is less and less self-absorbed. After contemplating and finally experiencing the Absolute in the middle chapters, he then gradually returns to more concrete aspects of his life, where he can integrate what he has learned.

The Gita's first chapter stands firmly on everyday actualities, where Arjuna finds himself in the midst of conflict, symbolic of all the challenges of life. Overwhelmed by the poverty of his options, he makes the exemplary decision to enlist the aid of a wise guru, and describes his confusion to him. At the beginning of the second chapter, he states his position in philosophic terms, demonstrating that he is not merely panicking but has reached the limits of ordinary logic and cannot abide by them. He wants something better than the inferior options everyone else is fighting over. Krishna immediately begins to teach him, first correcting his flawed understanding of ordinary matters, then sketching out the broad outlines of a yoga of liberation. The Gita has begun its rise up from the muddy battlefield toward the sublime.

As the chapters progress toward the center, more abstract and metaphysical elements are introduced, as if an arrow of interest is moving away from the solid reality of the seeker to the ineffable essence of the goal. The middle two chapters are almost entirely about the mystical heights in the most general terms. Arjuna comes back into the narrative right after the descent has begun, with a stupendous vision in which he finally sees the true nature of what he has been pondering, and is overwhelmed.

The arch's descent is equally as gradual as the ascent. First Arjuna learns how to relate to the vision of wonder he has just had. Then Krishna lays out a schematic basis for integrating the

numinous vision with the manifested world. How our concepts shape our experience leads us to the final chapter where Arjuna is set down on the good earth once again, fully prepared to live well and prosper. His fears and doubts about his world have been cured, and he has learned how to make excellent decisions. He has been transformed from a seeker into a seer.

Everyone, just like Arjuna, pursues the horizontal course of their own life until for some an extraordinary insight or stimulus suddenly elevates them into a rainbow arch of self-examination. In Arjuna's case, guided by Krishna he soars to sublime heights, at the critical moment transmuting his theoretical speculations into direct experience. He then returns to his ordinary transactional life and continues on his way, but he has been forever changed. The vertical core of life, previously taken for granted or ignored, is now known to him, and he will see it everywhere he looks. That makes all the difference between an ordinary life and one infused with wisdom.

## Chapters One and Two

The first two chapters of the Gita are of critical importance. Curiously, the first chapter was universally ignored until Nataraja Guru revealed its value in his revolutionary commentary. It is an exposition of Arjuna's doubt and confusion, which are the very things that impel him to seek instruction from a guru. The entire Gita is a kind of response to Arjuna's malady, leading him out of his troubles by the application of intelligence. There is no magic involved, only clear understanding. Arjuna's confusion, which the Gita calls a yoga (its title is The Yoga of Arjuna's Despondency), teaches us the value of questioning and rejection of generally accepted beliefs.

The key factor is that Arjuna is expected to fight in a war, but he wants to run away and escape his obligations. Desperate, he enunciates his problems in detail, then drops his bow,

overwhelmed with sorrow. He will not pick it back up until the very end of the eighteenth chapter.

By the second chapter (Unitive Reason and Yoga), Arjuna has calmed down enough to state his case with philosophical excellence and ask Krishna to teach him better options. Krishna launches right in, beginning one of the most sublime discourses in all of literature.

Krishna first sketches what might be called commonsense reasoning, and uses it to challenge Arjuna's chaotic state of mind. This is the first step in creative discipleship: the guru opposes any lopsidedness on the part of the disciple, leading them to a state of neutrality where learning can begin in earnest. The first half of the second chapter presents this initial balancing act. In the second half, Krishna sketches the broad outlines of yoga theory and hints at its radical nature, in a sense giving the gist of the entire Bhagavad Gita. For this reason, the second chapter is often regarded as the epitome of yoga as conceived by the ancient rishis.

## The Role of Religion

It is curious that the Gita is almost invariably spoken of as a religious scripture, whereas the Gita itself discredits religion in no uncertain terms. This runs parallel to the popular emphasis on social obligations in a work that enunciates them only so they can be recognized as impediments.

The long line of commentators who portray the Gita as a guide to duty and conformity have turned their backs on the Upanishadic wisdom and are peddling a sort of medieval Hindu-Christian mishmash, long on servility and short on realization and individual freedom. It can certainly be argued that the latter accurately represents the mainstream of most religions nowadays, and so is "right" in that sense, but the present interpretation is offered for those who find such attitudes distasteful. My teachers made a convincing case that the original intent was much more radical and liberating, and well worth revisiting.

India's pride and joy, Vedanta, is a philosophy, not a religion. Its three pillars are the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahma Sutras. The Gita as a *yoga shastra*, a scientific textbook of yoga, deals with transcendental psychology, explaining how to overcome the conditioning of one's upbringing to become a whole and free individual. It recognizes that one of the deepest and most potentially insidious forms of conditioning is instilled by religious training. Treating this cosmic song as a religious work is a tip-off that the commentator has missed this crucial point and that much of its liberating advice will be watered down and washed away.

It's ironic that the great historical compilations of nonreligious or even antireligious wisdom have over time become the basis of religions themselves. Lao Tzu's incisive sayings expanded into Taoism, the Buddha's protestations that there is nothing anywhere laid the foundation of Buddhism, and the Bhagavad Gita, written in part to discredit the priesthood's stranglehold on the people of India and religion's stranglehold on the human spirit, is today worshipped as a religious scripture. One of the tasks of the sincere seeker is to circumvent the accretions clinging to the original text, separating the wheat from the chaff and penetrating to the heart of the matter. One must be highly skeptical of a religious cast to any commentary as being of at best a secondary level of understanding. Nataraja Guru puts this idea quite simply in his *Integrated Science of the Absolute*:

In the Vedanta of India, with its textbooks such as the Bhagavad Gita and the large body of literature called the Upanishads, we have already stated that these books claim to be a Science of the Absolute called *brahma-vidya*. It is a mistake commonly made to treat this part of wisdom literature as belonging to Hindu religion. By its dynamic and open outlook such literature refuses to be fitted into any orthodox context of a closed and static religious setup. (135-6)

The present commentary is for those for whom a personal deity-concept is not appealing. For those who like it or need it, there are many, many versions already in existence. For the rest, a non-theistic interpretation is a welcome addition to the literature.

### Why the Bhagavad Gita is not the Song of the Lord

The word *gita* means song. The Gita is a song in the sense that it is to be lived, not just read. Ideas, like words, are only symbols. We have to reanimate the ideas as living realities, and only then is their secret revealed. Great composers convert their cosmic music to lines and dots on paper. We can admire those books of sheet music, and see how the lines and dots make pretty patterns, and even collect stacks of them. But only when musicians play the music does it come back to life and the meaning stand revealed. This is the task of all students of religion or philosophy: to reanimate the ideas by bringing them to life in ourselves. It marks the difference between spiritual and academic attitudes.

Although most philosophic critiques of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita tend to be rationally oriented, ecstasy is an important feature in them. The Gita is a song, and enlightenment lifts the heart like a song. A song differs from ordinary speech in the same way that ecstasy differs from ordinary life. The Gita's teaching is designed to convert the individual notes of knowledge we are composed of into an enchanting spiritual symphony.

The title *Bhagavad Gita* is commonly translated as the "Lord's Song." Krishna, the Bhagavad Gita's guru, is most commonly referred to in the text as Bhagavan, and it is he who gives his name to the Bhagavad Gita: "the Song of Bhagavan." The common translation of *bhagavan* as "Lord" is based on some highly dubious and dualistic conceptions that are out of synch with the unitive flavor of the work. Nataraja Guru detested what he called the "Lord-Lordism" that gushed from Gita commentaries, which basically converts the dignified wisdom of a philosophical

treatise into a worshipful religious tract. In the process most of the psychological insights are lost.

The term *lord* is a feudal appellation for a ruler of serfs. Such a barbaric concept is precisely what the Gita intends to do away with. We are to become full-fledged human beings who can and do act independently, not groveling followers of orders from Above, or worse, supplicants of favors from a ruling elite. So while Bhagavan is primarily a respectful form of address, the translation “Lord” is completely incorrect. It debases both sides of a relationship that should transcend all master-slave dichotomies.

but the present commentary is written for those who do not recognize any lord.

The temptation is great, when we think about attuning ourselves to the Absolute, to give all importance to That and none to our side of the equation. We may imagine that by debasing ourselves we impart greater glory to the Beyond, but that just throws the balance off more and more. The Beyond is right here. When the Upanishads tell us that we *are* the Absolute, they aren't speaking metaphorically. We glorify the Absolute by exemplifying it with increasing skill and insight. A self-deprecating attitude may seem politically correct, but it actually demeans the Absolute and creates a divisive schism, torpedoing the unitive state of mind.

Roberto Calasso, in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, reveals a parallel degeneration of an ancient Greek term for God:

By the time of the tragedians, *dîos* had come to mean nothing more than “divine,” insofar as it is a “property of Zeus.” But in the Homeric age *dîos* means first and foremost “clear,” “brilliant,” “glorious.” To appear in Zeus is to glow with light against the background of the sky. Light on light. When Homer gives the epithet *dîos* to his characters, the word does not refer first of all to what they may have of “divine,” but to

the clarity, the splendor that is always with them and against which they stand out. (102)

The Monier-Williams Sanskrit Dictionary defines *bhagavan* as “possessing fortune, fortunate, prosperous, happy, glorious, illustrious, divine,” before the more modern “adorable, venerable, holy,” etc. I have followed Nataraja Guru in translating it simply as “Krishna.” What that name implies is revealed by a scrutiny of the entire Gita, especially X.20, where Krishna is “the soul seated in the heart of all beings,” and “the beginning and the middle and even the end of beings.” In other words he is a guru, an incarnation of the Absolute.

My aim is to restore the original vision in which *bhagavan* is not used as a term expressing abject devotion to a god, but is indicative of respect and admiration toward an excellent teacher, which is the correct attitude to have respecting a guru.

## The Epithets

Throughout the work, Krishna and Arjuna have many epithets substituted for their names, such as “Mighty armed,” “Winner of wealth,” etc. Nataraja Guru suggests there is a world of implications contained in these monikers, but to avoid confusion, I have used merely the names Krishna and Arjuna. The epithets are really not all that significant. The adjectives almost certainly play a role by helping the text fit the exacting meter of four lines of eight syllables each for every verse. They do reveal a fascinating aspect of the Gita as an oral document, however.

Although the Gita itself is tightly structured, obviously the product of careful planning, the Mahabharata epic in which it is housed much more closely resembles the broad, rambling nature of the Iliad and Odyssey of Homer. Scholars of the ancient Homeric epics have concluded that the similar usage of epithets in them is evidence of their original composition as improvised oral

performances. Any bard worth their salt has an arsenal of such handy phrases to fit every metrical demand. Moreover, the use of stock phrases is a gambit allowing time for the bard to simultaneously ponder the next thrust of improvisation.

Recognizing that these epics are an artistic compendium of oral archives accumulated over a long period of time makes it comprehensible that a single anonymous author or group eventually set them down. They are a precious historical record being preserved for posterity. Creating them purely from scratch would have required an unbelievably vast intellect, but collecting them is certainly possible for a mere genius.

For composers like Mozart, there is evidently a geyser of inspiration erupting within them, yet it is expressed in the musical language structure of the period. Invention and convention thus go hand in hand. The existing forms may be greatly enriched and expanded by the composer, but they also serve as the supporting ground from which the leaps of creativity are launched. None of us lives in a vacuum. We cannot help reflecting the mental structure we have imbibed from birth, even under the benign influence of overwhelming inspiration. The amalgam of structure and formless creative inspiration is the dialectical expression of life at its best.

In the case of the Gita, recording the mystical process of wisdom transmission offers the additional benefit of not merely providing instruction for disciples but gurus as well. We see many modern “gurus” who became enlightened by accident, in the bathtub or lying in bed, for example. They have a certain glowing cachet, but their appeal can be rather tepid and their teachings sparse until they assimilate some of the tried and true methods for conceiving and explaining what has happened to them. They have to learn how to express the ineluctable experience in comprehensible terms, for their fellow humans if not for themselves.

The Gita may thus be viewed as a textbook for gurus even more than an instruction for disciples. Many nuances of the bipolar dance of enlightenment are revealed or implied herein. The ancient

secrets—ancient even at the time of their being set down in written form perhaps two thousand years ago—are codified to guide potential teachers for all eternity, and they have held up very well indeed. Very probably they have been tinkered with down through the ages, as have all the old scriptures, but in this instance at least, not to their detriment.

## Caste

According to the Gita, human types fall along a continuum of degrees of liberty, with those who crave a fixed template at one end and those who insist on full freedom at the other. This is the basis of caste distinctions, and it is meant as a tool for self-analysis, not as a rigid set of constraints. What caste became—essentially a variant of racism as a means of oppression—is a vast tragedy that should be eradicated. Krishna himself says he created caste and also abolishes it, in IV, 13:

The fourfold color grades were created by myself on the basis of innate disposition and vocation that accorded with each; know Me to be the maker of such as also to be its undoer, unexpended.

The key is the relation to “innate disposition”: caste becomes bondage when it doesn’t accord with a person’s motivation.

Caste in the Gita has four main categories, based on the importance of freedom. Many people would rather have security than free choice, which carries with it a great deal of uncertainty. The type of human primarily concerned with duty and security is the *sudra* or laborer. When you work for someone else, you have to do what they want you to do. But the rest of humanity craves freedom in increasing admixture to necessity, in ascending order: merchants (*vaishyas*) with some freedom and a lot of duties; politicians, athletes and scientists (*kshatriyas*) who have a greater range of options; and priests and artists (*brahmins*) with the most.

The Gita extols the relinquisher or the renunciate as the most excellent, meaning those who do not compromise their freedom with necessity at all, or very little. While all are dear from the cosmic perspective, the only “duty” Krishna recommends is to follow your own best assessment of every situation, in other words to be true to yourself. If you are busy trying to accommodate yourself to an arbitrarily assigned niche, you won’t be able to live up to your innate potentials, but when those potentials are given primacy, the inevitable limitations of life in a body are no longer seen as impediments; they become its practical means of expression.

Originality is a key element here. Most disciplines, whether scientific or religious, have strict parameters to define what they are. The Gita’s philosophy, by contrast, is open-ended. In fact, it is open on all sides. The delight of the universe is in serendipity and originality, and the only constraints are what is possible: an exceedingly vast ambit we have only begun to explore as a species. A great part of the evolution of consciousness is discovering the seemingly endless possibilities afforded to us by nature.

Arbitrary, limiting parameters have been set up by the advocates of the various disciplines, usually in times long past. They are almost always based on a tightly constrained world view that is unnecessary for the seeker of truth to take into account. Scientific discoveries and spiritual insights well up whenever a thinker breaks the mold. Afterwards there may be room for less original experimenters to explore some of the implications of what has already been discovered, but the Eureka! moments rely on breaking out of the known to grasp the unknown.

Knowing this, we should not take the Gita as a blueprint, full of explicit instructions on how to live. Instead it is a training course in how to break out of constraints to become who we truly are: creative geniuses that are the stupendous product of billions of years of successful evolution. As neuroscientist David Eagleman puts it, on the second page of *Incognito*, “If you ever feel lazy or dull, take heart: you’re the busiest, brightest thing on the planet.”

The Gita is a call to transcend our mundane duties and experience the joy of ever-new life.

### The Present Commentator

My own lineage begins formally with Narayana Guru (1954-1928), the great seer of South India. His eminent disciple Nataraja Guru produced a remarkable and unique commentary on the Gita in the 1950s. He meticulously trained his disciple Nitya Chaitanya Yati, who in turn became an eloquent expounder of many aspects of wisdom. I was fortunate to take a number of full courses on the Gita with Nitya, beginning in 1970, and was his amanuensis during the preparation of his own commentary on it. Nitya's book was written during an extremely busy period, and skips over many of the intriguing ideas he presented in his classes. Because of this there is a lot of latitude for a Gita exegesis based on his superlative vision.

Under my guru, Nitya, I underwent a similar kind of intensive training course to Arjuna's, so I am familiar with many of the subtleties implied in the text. This aspect is missing from most commentaries and translations, unfortunately. Working carefully once more through the entire Gita (a process lasting nearly a decade) has given me a fantastic opportunity to solidify my work with the guru and investigate many of the nuances we touched on together but I wasn't able to fully appreciate at the time.

I offer what follows as a distillation of the wisdom of my immediate forebears, which to my knowledge has no equal. Aum.