

# THE BHAGAVAD GITA AND THE WEST

The Esoteric Meaning of the Bhagavad Gita  
and Its Relation to the Letters of St. Paul

Fourteen Lectures Held in Cologne and Helsinki  
December 28, 1912-January 1, 1913  
and May 28-June 5, 1913

EDITED, WITH INTRODUCTION, DESCRIPTIVE OUTLINES  
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INCLUDING THE TEXT OF THE BHAGAVAD GITA  
TRANSLATED BY EKRATH EASWARAN

RUDOLF STEINER

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# INTRODUCTION

## PART ONE

### I. The Bhagavad Gita: Revelation and Transformation

#### *1. Approach to the Gita*

This volume presents an interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita (“The Song of the Lord”) by Rudolf Steiner, the early-twentieth-century philosopher, educator, esoteric teacher, and founder of Anthroposophy. Steiner interprets the Gita within the context of the Western spiritual and esoteric tradition. The editor’s introduction treats the Bhagavad Gita as a (and perhaps *the*) distinctively Indian scripture, and the revelation of the Hindu god Krishna to the warrior Arjuna as having universal significance. As the volume is focused on the Gita and the West, the introduction explains interpretations of the Gita by Indian spiritual teachers important in the modern West as well as Western interpreters. Revealed in India in approximately the sixth century B.C.E., the Gita has since helped to shape its country of origin. For two and a half millennia the Gita has been embedded in the core of Indian mythic, religious, and spiritual consciousness. For the past century and a half it has increasingly had a significant influence in the West.

The Gita has been as foundational for India as the Bible has been for the West. Because it issued from the *Mahabharata*, the ancient defining tale of Indian mythic culture, the Gita is also comparable in its definitive cultural influence to the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. As the Gita is chanted daily throughout India by pandits (religious teachers, pronounced “pundits”), it continues to be alive for many millions of Indians, including many who cannot read Sanskrit, and no doubt many who are illiterate. It has been interpreted by the major figures in the Indian religious and philosophical tradition, including Shankara, Ramanuja, Chaitanya, Madhva, Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan (former president of India and perhaps the foremost Indian philosopher of

the twentieth century), and especially Sri Aurobindo (the foremost twentieth-century Indian spiritual teacher).

Among the twentieth-century Indian interpreters of the Gita, M. K. (Mahatma) Gandhi offers a particularly distinctive rendering, one that would be difficult to defend at a scholarly level but has proven very influential. Gandhi insists that the battle that provides the occasion for the revelation of the god Krishna to the warrior Arjuna is a mythic (non-historical) battle. Gandhi's interpretation in effect changes Krishna's counsel to Arjuna: Instead of Krishna instructing Arjuna to fight in the great civil war, Gandhi insists that Krishna's directive should be understood to mean "go and fight the battle within the self, the battle between compassion and selfishness." The interpretation of Sri Aurobindo, in a stunning contrast between two of India's great teachers of the first half of the twentieth century, insists that Krishna was indeed instructing Arjuna to fight—just as Aurobindo himself instructed India, in direct opposition to the counsel of Gandhi, to fight with the British against Germany in the Second World War.

The revelation of the divine Krishna would seem to be of great significance for humanity at the present time. Surely the yogas (spiritual disciplines) of knowledge, action, love, and mediation, as taught in the Gita, must increasingly guide humanity as it faces the unprecedented deterioration, and perhaps irreversible destruction, of the entire ecosphere. Further, a reflective person cannot act confidently without a deep knowledge of the rightness of motive and effect. Action and knowledge are most efficacious when joined by love or devotion to a divine reality.

Increasingly, humanity must also work in relation to the teachings of the Gita concerning divine beings who sacrificially enter human history in times of peril and loss of vision.<sup>5</sup> With this expectation affirmed, it is perhaps possible for twenty-first century persons to see the incarnational reality not only of Krishna, but also of Buddha and Christ, and ideally of all three. The Bhagavad Gita, particularly as

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5. In Jewish tradition, according to Proverbs 29:18, "where there is no vision, the people perish." In the Hindu tradition, when there is no vision, the Avatar comes.

interpreted by Rudolf Steiner, could encourage contemporary humanity to see Krishna, Buddha, and Christ, and perhaps other such beings, as teachers and saviors of humanity and the earth. The claim that one can be a disciple of Krishna, or Buddha, or Christ, but never more than one of these, could become passé.

The Gita, however, is not an easy or obvious text for a person of twenty-first-century Western consciousness. It sets its hearer at least two challenges. The first difficulty is submission to a guru, in this case Krishna. How is such submission compatible with the ideal of individual freedom and responsibility that characterizes contemporary life in the West? Second, how can a spiritual teaching conclude with the command, from a god, for a warrior on the front line to throw spears, knowing that the fabric of society will be torn asunder? For us as for Arjuna, despondency in the face of war makes sense. Arjuna begins in bewilderment and depression and ends in action—in fact, the most dramatic action imaginable: hand-to-hand combat in a war between cousins. According to Krishna, who reveals himself to be the god Vishnu and one with Brahman (Ultimate Reality), to the extent that Arjuna would be conscious of Krishna, he must participate in this civil war.

Presumably, the essential teaching of a great scripture cannot be so simple as to affirm a just war and instruct a warrior to fight. Virtually all of the interpreters of the Gita invite the reader to look behind the words of the text to a revelation expressed, perhaps metaphorically or allegorically, in the Gita's ninety pages. According to some interpreters, Rudolf Steiner and Sri Aurobindo most prominently, the reader is invited to consider the possibility that behind the words there are spiritual beings or realities, particularly the god Krishna; and behind or above Krishna an infinite, eternal, original principle or cause, a divine presence or creativity. In the passage quoted at the front of this volume, Sri Aurobindo invites the reader to work at this text spiritually, so as to get past the pictures, past the words, to the meanings behind, to the speaker behind, to the being behind the speaking, and then to the Being (Brahman) behind the beings.

With effort it may be possible to see Arjuna not merely as a warrior in a long-ago civil war but as the representative of humanity receiving

the spiritual teachings necessary for the next epoch in the evolution of human consciousness. It may also be possible to see Krishna as a god who is one with God, with Brahman, the absolute divinity. As Christ in Jesus could assert, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). Krishna could be heard to assert that before the earth, before humanity, before the other gods, before he was the god Krishna, he was God, Brahman.

Whatever its true revelations, the Gita did not come as an abstract theological treatise but as a story through which are woven many insights, explanations, directives, and opportunities for a higher vision. The way to these revelations begins with the story in the Indian mythic and spiritual tradition prior to its evolution as a separate text.

## *2. The Bhagavad Gita in the Indian Spiritual Tradition*

Although books on Hinduism from the perspective of comparative religions tend to emphasize the concept of absolute oneness as well as absolute infinity and eternity, the Bhagavad Gita features a personal God in conversation with a single human being at a particular time in history. The Upanishads, the mystical-philosophical texts composed several centuries before the Gita, contain the famous texts that announce the absolute unity of the divine: All creation, every particular, is Brahman, the One without a second. The Upanishads are the foundational texts for Vedanta, the main philosophical tradition within Hinduism. The Upanishads also serve as a background for the Gita, but unlike the Upanishads, the Gita emphasizes the personal nature of the divine, the God Krishna. The Upanishads and Vedanta are generally, though not uniformly, monistic—“All is One”—whereas the Gita is essentially theistic—God is a reality distinct from creation. In the Gita the oneness of the divine is affirmed but not emphasized. The Gita presents God in the form of Krishna, who puts things right in the world. It is Krishna who is to be known and adored, and is the only true and right guide of human action.

The Gita begins: “Taught by the blessed Narayana” (i.e., Vishnu) to Arjuna, “compiled by Vyasa the ancient seer, in the middle of the *Mahabharata*, the blessed of eighteen chapters, the bestower of the nectar

of non-dualistic wisdom, the destroyer of rebirth, the *Bhagavad Gita*.” *Maha* means great and *bharata* refers to the tale of India, the mythic reality of the Indian soul. *Gita* means song, and *Bhagavad* means the Lord, specifically Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu, who with Brahma (the creator) and Shiva (the destroyer) comprises the triune deity of Hinduism. This trinity invites comparison with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—an association strengthened by the obvious similarity between Krishna, the avatar-savior of the *Gita*, and Christ, the Son-savior of the New Testament.

Though it has its own history as a separate text of fewer than a hundred pages, the *Bhagavad Gita* originated as and remains part of the *Mahabharata*, the great encyclopedic epic poem that evolved from approximately the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C.E., adding episodes and characters to what eventually became a text of 24,000 verses. The main story line of the *Mahabharata* traces the rivalry between two sets of cousins for control of the family kingdom.

The Kaurava family had two sets of cousins, the five sons of Pandu, called the Pandavas, and the 100 sons of Dhritarastra, called the Kuru princes. The Pandavas were known to be virtuous, while the Kuru princes were known for their bad character. The eldest son of Pandu was Yudhisthira; the oldest son of Dhritarashtra was Durudana. When Pandu died, his sons were not old enough to rule and so came under the care of his brother, Dhritarastra. Yudhisthira was tricked in a game of dice and lost the Pandava kingdom. He and his brothers and their family were exiled for thirteen years, at the end of which they were to rule again.

When the terms of the agreement had been met, Durudana, supported by the other sons of Dhritarashtra, even under the threat of war, refused to honor the terms of the agreement. When all efforts to negotiate failed, Yudhisthira reluctantly gave approval to the war. The rival sides each gathered together an enormous army of allies for a final showdown on the field of Kurukshetra, “the field of the Kurus,” pitting the Kurus’ sons and their teachers Bhisma and Drona against the Pandavas, including the great warrior Arjuna (younger brother of Yudhisthira) and his charioteer, Krishna. At this critical moment Arjuna, greatest of the Pandava warriors, rode to the forefront of the

battle line with his charioteer Krishna and began the discourse known as the Bhagavad Gita. Faced with this battle, he asks: "What is my dharma (duty)? Should I fight or not fight?"

In the *Mahabharata*, this story, which appears in the sixth of eighteen books, serves as the vehicle for the revelation of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, which is presented on the same level, or in a way completely consistent with, the rest of the *Mahabharata*. Krishna appears to be a very special, somewhat divinely endowed human being, and in book XVI Krishna dies accidentally and ascends gloriously to heaven. However, in the chapters of the *Mahabharata* that become the Bhagavad Gita as a separate text,<sup>6</sup> the story evolves into a decidedly spiritual, or mystical, revelation (a *shruta*, "that which is heard"). That is, those who recited this tale on behalf of Vyasa<sup>7</sup> (the blind seer) began to tell it differently from the way it first appeared in the *Mahabharata*. For some interpreters this is just a distortion or inflation of the original tale, a myth with a life of its own. For the mainstream of Hinduism, however, the Bhagavad Gita is *shruti*, "knowledge by hearing."

In the Gita version of this conflict and Krishna's counsel, there appear passages that seem multidimensional, symbolic, and mystical, with allusions to Indian spiritual teachings and disciplines. It appears that Krishna has access to amazing realities and can lift his pupil to astonishing heights of vision and insight. In the middle of the dialogue Arjuna seems to be in ecstasy, outside of and higher than his ordinary self. He appears transformed from a self to a Self, from an individual human *jiva* to a divine *Atman*. After the first chapter, which sets the scene with the two clans prepared to slaughter one another, the remainder of the dialogue, the next seventeen chapters, is really a

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6. For a counter to this position, see J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Bhagavadgita in the Mahabharata* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981): "The Bhagavadgita was conceived and created in the context of the *Mahabharata*. It was not an independent text that somehow wandered into the epic. On the contrary, it was conceived and developed to bring to a climax and solution to the dharmic dilemma of a war which was both just and pernicious" (p. 5).

7. Vyasa, who was believed to have had a miraculous birth and, like most tellers of ancient tales, to have been physically blind and spiritually sighted, was credited with creating many important Hindu texts.

monologue of teacher to pupil that mysteriously takes the reader (or in India more likely a listener) beyond ordinary consciousness.

The first chapter of the Gita presents Arjuna on the battlefield at the head of his side in a civil war. As a member of the *ksatriya varna* (warrior caste), his life task is to protect his society, by war when necessary. His charioteer, Krishna, is behind him. Arjuna recognizes that once this battle begins in earnest, it will result in the death of both armies, threatening their families and the society to which they all belong. He wonders whether the battle will uphold or destroy dharma, the divine order that holds all of these parts in proper relationship. As he looks across the field he sees teachers, relatives, and friends armed with spears and arrayed as the enemy of his side in this impending fratricidal slaughter.

Horried, Arjuna says, in effect, “Hell, no, I won’t go. I will not fight this war that will not only kill most of the combatants but will destroy the world as we know it.” “Arjuna’s Despondency,” the title of Chapter I, refers to his clear-eyed, almost existential realization that once the war begins, not only will the warriors be slain but the temples, schools, livestock, and farms will all fall into chaos. His feelings seem entirely justified. The next seventeen chapters are essentially Krishna’s response to Arjuna’s despondency and to the human condition at that time. In the process, Krishna provides a glimpse of the spiritual world from the Hindu perspective and with relevance for the whole of humanity. To follow Krishna’s instruction to Arjuna requires an understanding of Sanskrit terms used throughout the text. These terms have a long history before and after the Gita.

### 3. *Dharma, Karma, Yoga(s) and Other Important Sanskrit Terms*

Zen Buddhist teachers are fond of telling their students not to mistake the finger pointing to the moon for the moon itself. All of the traditions make a similar point: Do not confuse ritual—its method, techniques, concepts, or instruments—with the divine or whatever spiritual reality is the goal of one’s effort. Employing a host of metaphors, spiritual teachers urge the student not to mistake the

preparation for the achievement, or the practices and aids for the spirit itself. That said, tools such as key terms are essential for an understanding of the path (the finger, the practice) and the goal (the moon, enlightenment). Textual knowledge, with appropriate distinctions and explanations, is essential to the Gita's meaning and to the practices each reader is encouraged to follow in an effort to replicate Arjuna's experience of Krishna consciousness.

Anyone who seriously aspires to knowledge of spiritual liberation or of the god Krishna, or to selfless action, or to devotion to the divine, or to an efficacious silence, will require the use of certain terms. Effort toward the transformation of consciousness will also be needed. A third necessary component will be an affinity with the experience of Arjuna, his inner turmoil at the bottom rung of the ladder of consciousness or spiritual awareness. It is this ladder that each reader/listener is invited to climb with Krishna's assistance. While one does not need knowledge of Sanskrit in order to understand the Gita's message, one does need to understand, and to work meditatively with, certain key concepts, a partial list of which would include the following: *dharma*, *karma*, *moksha*, *avatar*, *maya*, *sankhya*, three *gunas*, and most especially the four *yogas*—*jnana*, *karma*, *bhakti*, and *raja*. These terms will be explained in the following several pages and used throughout this introductory essay. (As *dharma*, *karma*, *Yoga*, *maya*, and *avatar* are now familiar in English, they will not be italicized in the pages that follow.)

*Dharma* refers to the total correct context of an event, and especially the context of a person's obligations, according to age and caste. Every aspect of traditional Hindu life has its own set of obligations or duties. Arjuna's *dharma*, for example, is that of a warrior; his presumed duty in the total historical, divinely ordained order would be to fight in an unavoidable civil war. Arjuna's position in society and his particular work as a *ksatriya* were prescribed by his birth family, and that birth is understood as having been determined by his previous life. Like every person of his religious culture, Arjuna had to reconcile four *dharmas*, as follows:

*Sva-dharma*, one's own personal obligation consistent with one's inner self or nature, including one's *karma* (below).

*Varna*, caste. The Hindu tradition acknowledges four vocational classes, *brahmin* (priest, teacher), *ksatriya* (ruler, leader), *vaishya* (businessman—in traditional India there were no businesswomen), and *shudra* (farmer, laborer). (Untouchables are technically not a caste but a group of people who in effect have been systematically and cruelly relegated to a position below the *shudra* caste.)

*Ashrama*, successive roles in life, including child/student, householder, retired person, each with its particular duties.

*Mokshadharma*, or *moksha*, means spiritual liberation, specifically release from the burden of negative karma built up over one or more lifetimes of unenlightened deeds and thoughts. Moksha should be understood as extraordinary dharma, a set of duties that one should assume only after one has demonstrated a disciplined practice of ordinary dharma.

Arjuna was expected to express his interior purpose, his karma, in the context of his multiple duties, his dharma. His despondency arose from the limitations of this established world order and an inability to imagine a new cultural framework. From this questioning a new order was about to be born, for this was the beginning of a time when, as W. B. Yeats said of the early twentieth century, “the center cannot hold.”<sup>8</sup> When a culture enters a period of uncertainty or chaos, it doesn’t usually return to an old status quo but instead ushers in a new cultural framework, thereby revising the cultural dharma and the dharma of representative individuals such as Arjuna.

In a traditional culture defined by karma and dharma, it would be unthinkable for a warrior on the front line of a civil war to question whether he should fight. To the extent that dharma presides, that it is coherent and effective, the question that Arjuna asks in the first chapter of the Gita should not arise. There should be no conscientious objectors and no warriors refusing to fight in the Gita, just as there

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8. W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming” (1921): “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.”

should be none in Homer's *Iliad*, or in the army of Alexander the Great. It takes an entirely new situation for somebody in this culture to say, "Even though I am born a warrior and even though this is a civil war, maybe I should not fight." Such a statement suggests existential anxiety. More than fear, it expresses fundamental confusion and loss of direction in one's life and the situation in which one is expected to act. A new age, a new paradigm, a new dharma, would seem to be dawning through Arjuna's human despondency and Krishna's divine reply.

In his despondency, Arjuna does not understand that this life and this task are a result of previous lives and a preparation for the next life. When Krishna tells him that he must lift his consciousness, Arjuna in effect replies that he does not know how to do that. Perhaps, he thinks, he should change the life of a warrior for that of a monk. Instead, beginning in the second chapter, Krishna undertakes to lead Arjuna through the kind of transformation that will enable him to understand the whole sweep of karma and rebirth, and the ways in which one's dharma discloses and guides one's life task. He also shows some of the ways in which, through the yogas, a person can develop spiritual awareness and, ultimately, liberation from the round of births.

Karma, usually thought of as a law, refers to the positive or negative value that accrues to the person who performs any deed or thought, both in a given lifetime and over many lifetimes. It is a chain of rebirth in which a life is a link, such that each life begins as the exact product of the essential spiritual results of the previous life. Arjuna's karma, for example, landed him at the head of his side of a civil war with sufficient capacity to see the horror of war, sufficient conscience to question it, and sufficient spiritual alertness to benefit from Krishna's revelation.

An avatar is a divine being who enters human history during a time of *adhharma* (when the context for human action has fallen into chaos). That Arjuna would question whether, or why, he should fight in the civil war shows the need for Krishna to intervene and to restore dharma—which in a time of transition would be the restoration of order, but in a way that absorbs some significant change. Krishna is certainly considered an avatar, and many would consider Sri Ramakrishna, the nineteenth century Hindu mystic, an avatar. Some

claim that Mahatma Gandhi must be an avatar, and others would regard Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the twentieth-century mystic teachers of integral Yoga, as co-avatars.

The Bhagavad Gita is not only the revelation *by* Krishna, it is more importantly the revelation *of* Krishna, the reincarnation of Vishnu, one with Brahman, an avatar, divine teacher, and rescuer of a confused humanity. This one-hundred-page book in eighteen chapters constitutes both a divinely inspired revelation and a revelation of the divine. A revelation can be considered divinely inspired not because it takes place without human agency, but because it claims both a divine source and the active, co-creating participation of one or more human beings. Such a revelation would seem to be neither universal nor arbitrary but exactly what is needed for a specific time, place, problem, or an entire culture. It is disseminated through a specific language, set of concepts, and worldview. It is intelligible to and significant for a specific community.

In the fourth chapter, Krishna replies to Arjuna:

<sup>5</sup> You and I have passed through many births, Arunja. You have forgotten, but I remember them all.

<sup>6</sup> My true being is unborn and changeless. I am the Lord who dwells in every creature. Through the power of my own maya, I manifest myself in a finite form.

<sup>7</sup> Whenever dharma declines and the purpose of life is forgotten, I manifest myself on earth.

<sup>8</sup> I am born in every age to protect the good, to destroy evil, and to reestablish dharma.

<sup>9</sup> Those who know me as their own divine Self break through the belief that they are the body and are not reborn as separate creatures.<sup>9</sup>

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9. *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. with introduction by Eknath Easwaran, with chapter introductions by Diana Morrison (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1985), pp. 85–86. See the full text of this translation at the back of this volume, pp. 235–313.

Krishna comes into the world because *adharma* has arisen, because humanity as represented by Arjuna has lost its way. Krishna remembers his previous lives, but Arjuna does not. Because Arjuna reveals that he has lost track of his place in the great chain of lives and karmically determined duties, Krishna will need to lead him to an understanding of dharma, karma, rebirth, and the yogas by which he might begin to think and act not as a despondent isolate but as a willing member of the entire cosmos sustained by the god Krishna.

*Maya*, a term that is prominent in the Upanishads (mystical and philosophical texts recited for several centuries prior to the Gita) and throughout the Hindu philosophical tradition, refers to the gap between unenlightened consciousness, the way each particular entity grasps reality, and the divine, i.e., Brahman, itself.

*Sankhya* is a system of philosophy that provides an account of the reality of particulars, called *prakriti*, in a dynamic relationship with the divine, called *purusha*; it provides the philosophical concepts for the *Yoga Sutras*, the systematization of Yoga practice written by Patanjali in the sixth century B.C.E.

*Guna* refers to three kinds, or levels, of soul: *sattvic*, characterized by light; *rajasic*, characterized by energy; and *tamasic*, characterized by darkness and lethargy.

In the Gita there are four yogas, or spiritual paths to liberation: action, knowledge, devotion, and meditation.

*Karma-Yoga* is the spiritual discipline of selfless action, acting without attachment to the fruits of one's action. With respect specifically to Arjuna, he should fight because it is his duty to do so according to the multi-lived history that landed him in the dharma described at the beginning of the Gita. This discipline requires an evenness of mind in the execution of his duty to fight, specifically, a lack of desire for the benefits to himself that would come with victory, and an absence of hatred for the enemy.

The Gita begins its Yoga teaching in response to Arjuna's consternation concerning the action he is expected to perform, namely, throwing spears at the enemy—or receiving a spear thrown at him! This is the initial problem of the Gita: should Arjuna fight in this fratricidal battle knowing that it will lead to the slaughter of friends

and relatives and leave countless families in grave circumstances? Krishna teaches Arjuna to act according to his dharma and karma, following one or more of the yogas. Krishna's complete teaching will include several other yogas, but the initial focus is entirely on the problem of action and the *karma*-Yoga solution.

In Chapter II Krishna explains that Arjuna cannot avoid action; action is a necessity. The question is whether Arjuna will act out of a despondent, self-pitying "little self" or out of a Self that is cosmic and in harmony with Krishna. *Karma*-Yoga requires Arjuna to act without concern for the way that his action will affect him and others—whether he or his friends and relatives will be killed, his family will be bereft, or worse. In every deed that he performs he must be indifferent to the results, including his own death or his causing the death of another. If not concern for the fate of his kinsmen and himself, what must his motive be? The Bhagavad Gita teaches that the only true motive of action is the divine will. Arjuna must become conscious of what Krishna prescribes, in this case that he follow his dharma as a warrior. This leads to the disturbing thought that Krishna teaches divinely inspired killing. In the same thought, however, he teaches a divinely inspired act of being killed and of upholding dharma. Arjuna is to act without concern for whether he will experience pleasure or pain, killing or being killed. This ideal of equanimity, equal acceptance concerning acceptance of pleasure and pain, is taught by the Buddha as well as by saints, Sufis, and other spiritual teachers worldwide, but the Gita's application of selfless action in hand-to-hand combat in a civil war is surely the most extreme application of this ideal.

*Jnana*-Yoga is the spiritual discipline of knowing, or at least trying to know, the divine. According to this Yoga, Arjuna needs to learn that the self that he knows himself to be by empirical (ordinary) knowledge is in fact part of a larger, universal Self, *Atman*. This knowledge is necessary in order for the ordinary self to give way to the Self, and thereby to act with the universality of the divine—in this case with the consciousness of Krishna. In the event of a war, a warrior must know what action to perform. While his life as a warrior is predetermined, his specific responsibilities require knowledge. He needs to understand the place of the civil war in the whole divine economy and

his place in his society, his caste duty, and his sequence of lives. He will need to join *jnana*- or knowledge-Yoga to the other yogas.

After the first few chapters, it becomes clear that Krishna is focused as much on knowledge as on action. Krishna teaches that Arjuna cannot know himself except by knowing Krishna. Krishna reveals (*shruta*), and Arjuna is invited to knowledge by hearing (*shruti*). Further, Arjuna can only act rightly by knowing his place within the divine reality that is none other than Krishna—recognizing that he is truly identical with Krishna. Arjuna must come to know this by replacing his ignorant perception of Krishna as a charioteer with the true vision of Krishna the god. In the early chapters Krishna responds in terms of Arjuna's predicament because he knows that at the early stage of the dialogue Arjuna cannot see anything divine, neither his divinely appointed task nor the divine being who is trying to instruct him.

In urging Arjuna to know himself Krishna is urging Arjuna to know his own divinity, to know himself as the very essence of Arjuna. If Arjuna but knew his actual identity he would know that Krishna is his higher self. Of course, in addition to being the higher self of Arjuna, Krishna is the higher self of all human beings. This is essentially the directive of the Delphic Oracle to Socrates—"Know yourself." If you do, you will have knowledge, not merely opinion, of the divine. It is also the directive of Paul: to know the self is to know Christ, because Christ lives within the human soul and is its essence.

This kind of knowledge comes from selfless thinking or thinking with the mind of the divine. It is thinking and knowing with the consciousness of Krishna—who is, as Arjuna eventually comes to understand, none other than Brahman, the Divine One, the God beyond all gods. To attain *jnana*-Yoga is to see the divine in the human and earthly. Ordinarily human beings see only surfaces or appearance, such as Krishna in his charioteer guise, and fail to see the reality of Krishna as the God of all universes, and of all gods. If Arjuna were to see Krishna in his own right, or Krishna as the higher self of all selves, he would be able to see that both sides of the battle are held lovingly by Krishna, are part of Krishna. Arjuna would see Krishna in each warrior—and in each spear!

The first half of the Gita essentially teaches a combination of karma-Yoga and *jnana*-Yoga: one has to know Krishna, or divinity, in order to know what to do, how to act selflessly. One has to know who one truly is, which is the same as knowing Krishna. Or, if one knows Krishna, one truly knows oneself; Krishna is Arjuna's true self. Whether by knowing oneself truly (as Krishna) or by knowing Krishna (as the one who knows oneself and All), one knows reality. It would not be enough to act Krishna-like, whatever that would mean, without real knowledge of Krishna. One has to know the extent of Krishna, the god who includes lifetimes, civilizations, eons, and universes. Short of this knowledge, it is likely that a warrior such as Arjuna would think that throwing or not throwing a spear would be the most important thing that ever happened. Once Arjuna comes to know the reality of Krishna, he will know that the spear, the warrior, the battle, the right rulership of India, India itself, humanity, the earth, the cosmos, are all but an instant, a speck, in the all-knowing extent and duration that is Krishna.

According to the Gita, the third Yoga to be practiced is the path or discipline of love, surrender, devotion to the divine. *Bhakti*-Yoga is the spiritual path of devotion to the divine, and specifically in the Gita, it is love of Krishna. The aim of this Yoga is an experience of the splendors of the Divine, including the action of the play of the divine in the world, called *lila*, and the subsequent ability to live within that play with total *ananda*, delight. In practicing *bhakti*, one is extending God's love through the universe. As the enemy is as much a manifestation of God as Arjuna is—though, of course, in the early chapters of the Gita, Arjuna is very far from knowing this—to love Krishna brings with it Krishna's love for the enemy. To throw a spear while loving Krishna in effect would be to throw a spear at oneself, or at everyone Krishna loves. As there is no non-Krishna in the world, to throw a spear at anyone is to throw a spear at Krishna. Understanding this, one can throw one's spear calmly, without attachment to the fruits of action, and, more importantly, with love for Krishna, for all that He is, all that He holds and reconciles. Such a loving, equanimous deed, equal in pleasure and pain, equal in response to killing or being killed, suffused with love of Krishna—this is the epitome of *bhakti*-Yoga, the discipline of love in action.

Hence, in this most extreme action of throwing a spear into the body of another warrior, Arjuna must act calmly and without self-interest, extending God's love through the universe. The enemy, after all, is as much a manifestation of God as Arjuna, even though in social, political, historical terms Arjuna's side in the civil war is right and just. The civil war and the killing on both sides are part of the *lila*—the divine drama.

*Raja-Yoga* means the royal way, the spiritual discipline of meditation, the practice of withdrawing the senses and calming the mind. In addition to the yogas of action, knowledge, and love, the Gita also teaches the Yoga of meditation based on the Yoga system of Patanjali. This Yoga system, summarized in the *Yoga Sutras* in the sixth century B.C.E., consists of eight steps:

1. *Yama*. Five moral abstentions
2. *Niyama*. Five moral observations
3. *Asana*. Balanced posture
4. *Pranayama*. Regularity of breath
5. *Pratyahara*. Withdrawal of senses
6. *Dharana*. Concentration
7. *Dhyana*. Meditation
8. *Samadhi*. Contemplation

While there is no chapter or series of verses in the Gita that summarize the eight steps of the *Yoga Sutras*, throughout the Gita there are verses that refer to yogic breathing, withdrawal of sense, or meditation, and finally to contemplation of the divine—which in the *Yoga Sutras* is the abstract principle *purusha*, but in the Gita is the personal God Krishna. The Gita teaches that anyone who would have clear consciousness of his or her inner life, where the divine is to be found as readily as it is to be found transcendently, must exclude all distractions to the senses, to breathing, and to thinking. By stilling the body and the mind the Yoga practitioner can see each action more clearly, in a divine light, unclouded by *tamas* (darkness). This kind of stillness of mind is particularly strong in the Buddhist tradition but it is also in the Indian tradition, and particularly in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* and thereby in the Gita.

Krishna's revelation draws upon several spiritual and philosophical traditions, including the Vedas, Upanishads, and particularly Sankhya philosophy, one of the six so-called orthodox philosophical systems in the Indian tradition. Sankhya developed during the century prior to the emergence of the Bhagavad Gita and was formulated systematically many centuries later in the *Sankhyakarika* ("Treatise on Sankhya") by Ishvara Krishna (an Indian philosopher named after Lord Krishna). Sankhya posits an ultimate metaphysical dualism: *purusha* (spirit), which is conscious but inactive and without content, and *prakriti* (matter), which is unconscious and active. *Purusha* neither produces nor is produced; it does, however, "entice" *prakriti* into activity by 'dancing before it,' with the result that *prakriti* is induced to go from an unmanifest state of pure potentiality into manifestation, pure activity or evolution; as a result the worlds are brought forth."<sup>10</sup>

Sankhya is a combination of metaphysics and epistemology and lends itself to spiritual disciplines such as the yogas of the Bhagavad Gita. Metaphysically, Sankhya posits a dualism of *purusha* and *prakriti* similar to the dualism of Brahman and maya developed by Vedanta: *purusha*, like Brahman, is ultimate and changeless; maya is plural and changing but, because material, not quite real. There are also three important differences between Sankhya and Vedanta: whereas Vedanta, though monistic, accounts for various gods, and in a sense includes theism, Sankhya does not posit a divinity at all. Similarly, in contrast to Vedanta, which only qualifiedly affirms the tentative reality of matter, matter in Sankhya is explained at great length and precise details in the context of evolutionary cycles. Finally, whereas Vedanta is ultimately a monism—Brahman is the only reality, all else being various degrees of unreality—Sankhya posits a dualism such that *purusha* and *prakriti* are parallel realities that do not interact. Each human being must come to understand and live the difference between *purusha* and *prakriti*. Clearly, this philosophy is ideal as a foundation for the yogas of the Gita.

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10. A. L. Herman, *An Introduction to Indian Thought* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976), p. 179.