

The Bhagavad-Gita

The *Bhagavad-Gita*, “The Song Celestial,” is an eighteen-chapter dialogue between Krishna and his pupil Arjuna, which occurs as a small portion of the Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*. A twentieth century example of its influential wisdom can be found through the study of the life and writings of Mahatma Gandhi. From his earliest non-violent causes in South Africa unto the day of his death, the *Bhagavad-Gita* was read and studied on a daily basis in his ashram. The Gita also formed the basis for many essays written by Ralph Waldo Emerson who was the first person in America to possess an English translation.

The first two chapters of the *Bhagavad-Gita*—“Survey of the Armies” and “Arjuna’s Despondency”—metaphorically depict the spiritual life as a battle between two sides of one family, the higher and lower aspects of all human beings. Arjuna, born to the warrior caste, has as his charioteer Krishna, whom he does not yet recognize for what he truly is—the second historically known Avatar of Vishnu. Before the battle begins Arjuna commands Krishna to draw his carriage into the open ground between the two armies. Looking from one to the other, Arjuna recognizes in each army friends and relatives and throws his weapons to the ground. He is despondent at the sight, telling Krishna he will not fight. Krishna reminds him that he is a warrior born and must do his duty as such. Krishna then enigmatically tells Arjuna that all these warriors have already been slain adding, “There is no non-existence for that which exists, and there is no existence for that which does not exist.” Krishna continues, “The sage grieves neither for the living nor the dead.”

Some interpreters take this setting literally. Hindus know it represents the archetypal spiritual battle necessary to become a true servant of Krishna and humanity.

Krishna confirms the difficulties of the battle, but assures Arjuna, “It is difficult, but it can be won.” The battle is between the Higher Self and its cunning, fear-based, and inverted reflection, the lower personal self that takes itself to be real. The battle can also be thought of as the struggle to allow higher more beneficent forces to rule one’s life rather than separative, personalized states of consciousness.

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The army opposing Arjuna symbolizes the aspects within us that veil Krishna and fear the Light. These must be defeated through transmutation and transcended.

The battle symbolizes our attachments to those aspects of ourselves, which hinder our search for truth. We live with the deluded impression that we are separate from others and from Krishna. We assume we have control over the fruits of our actions, thus suffering upon discovering we do not. The primary message of Krishna is: *renounce the fruits of action*.

Krishna convinces Arjuna to engage in the spiritual battle, through appealing to his ego-involved sense of being a warrior. Later in the text Arjuna comes to recognize Krishna's true nature: Omnipresence. Upon this realization Arjuna, utterly overwhelmed, falls prostrates himself at Krishna's feet, apologizing for having taken him merely as his charioteer. Here begins the portrayal of the archetypal relationship between a Teacher and a pupil.

Krishna reveals to Arjuna the existence of three paths leading to consciously becoming one with his Being. He does not tell Arjuna which path to follow, but does indicate that every human being is treading one of these paths—knowingly or otherwise. In most translations these paths are referred to as different *yogas*, not to be confused with the *yogas* of the body or the breath.

Karma Yoga, the path of action, has as its essential feature moves towards Krishna through purified motives, disinterested, detached and devoted action. An outstanding example of treading this path is found in Gandhi's characterization of himself as a Karma Yogan. This path is not about learning acting upon conventional values, not about becoming a good person. This path cannot be reduced to a rigid dichotomy between good and bad, right and wrong actions. The effect of the action cannot be divorced from the means leading to it. This is why Gandhi taught, "The ends are in the beginning." The highest level manifests as a love for all, especially for those whose actions one opposes. This idea Jesus taught in saying, "Love thy enemies." The individual must be loved; the actions non-violently opposed. Since we all act, the path of action consists in a continuous, conscious attempt to refine one's actions in accordance with the wisdom of the wise.

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It is not so much choosing a path, as it is recognition of the path being tread.

Those who wish to know, to have answers to life's most perplexing questions are attracted to *Jnana Yoga*, the path of knowledge, consisting of a gradual realization of Krishna's true nature. It involves deep study of scriptures, pondering upon their meanings, and deep meditation upon their universality. Continuity of such efforts leads the seeker to an ever-increasing awareness of the higher, impersonal mind reflecting universal truths. Krishna teaches, "I created this entire universe with a single portion of myself, yet remain separate." The student treading the path of knowledge must ultimately understand this statement pointing to the mysterious relationship between the One and many.

The third path is *Bhakti Yoga*, the path of devotion. Its essential nature consists of an increasingly pure, utter devotion to Krishna himself. This applies not only to every thought, word, and deed, but also to the devotee's increasing awareness of Krishna within all beings: "As one sun illumines the entire earth, so, too, does one Spirit illumine every body."

A fourth path, implied in the *Bhagavad-Gita* is *Raja Yoga*, the kingly yoga. It is greater than the sum of the whole of the other three paths. This is the most mysterious of paths trod by advanced students who have undergone the tests and trials of the other three paths—that are not to say they have mastered them—and who are being taught how to form subtle bodies out of impersonal noetic ideation. Such bodies exist in a realm beyond space and time. Raja Yogins are most difficult to find. Their knowledge is essentially esoteric. Were they to share with us, we would not understand and may, in fact, turn against them. H.P. Blavatsky wrote several articles upon Raja Yoga and Raghavan Iyer published a pamphlet entitled "Raga Yoga."

Krishna teaches Arjuna that all actions are carried out by the three *gunas* alone—identifying them as *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, goodness, desire, and lethargy respectively. These *qualities of nature* are discussed in detail emphasizing the need to ultimately transcend all three. To so is to become one with Krishna.

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Through identification with the three *gunas* comes an illusory conception of a separate, personal I. This illusion is the basis of human ignorance and error forming the obstruction of our awareness of Krishna.

Each of the four paths is means of overcoming this illusory sense of separateness from others. Krishna teaches that when this illusion and its attendant evils reach certain predominance, he incarnates in order to once again exemplify and teach the truths of existence.

While this vast universe we inhabit is said to be but a portion of Krishna's true being, we must remember his teaching that a single Spirit, a radiation from Krishna, animates everything within it. This realization requires a complete transcendence of all dualities, pairs of opposites.

Every human being has a *dharma* (duty) that must be discovered within and cannot be realized from without. Krishna teaches that most of the world's sufferings and evils stem from interference in the duties of others stating, "It is better to perform one's own duties poorly than to perform another's duties well. The duty of another is full of danger."

In stating that there is no non-existence for that which exists, Krishna teaches Arjuna that all human beings are reflections of Krishna and therefore immortal. In one of the most quoted passages in the Gita, he says: "I myself never was not nor thou nor all the princes of the earth, nor shall we ever hereafter cease to be. As the lord of this mortal frame experiences therein infancy, youth and old age, so in future incarnations will it meet the same. One who is confirmed in this belief is not disturbed by anything that may come to pass."

Krishna teaches that those who heed the inclinations of the senses, in them hath a concern. This concern leads to likes and dislikes, desires and aversions, which lead into further human bondage. These likes and dislikes incline the will toward or away from their objects. This bondage can be overcome through making the will obedient to the heart. He makes the distinction between the personal and the spiritual wills. The personal will becomes combative should the spiritual will be sought, hence the metaphor of the battlefield. It is a battle between the impersonal and the personal. The impersonal

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functions in terms of universal truths and axioms, the personal functions in terms of the variegated contents of the space-time continuum. The sage—one who has consciously become a portion of Krishna’s being—has no sense of space or time, yet effortlessly functions within their illusory parameters.

Perhaps the most encouraging words Krishna speaks to Arjuna are the words: “It is difficult, but it can be done.”

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