

The Bhagavad Gita



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANONYMOUS

The *Bhagavad Gita*'s authorship is uncertain and widely debated, but the entire *Mahabharata* (of which the *Gita* forms a part) was certainly passed down through various oral traditions before a number of standardized written versions emerged many hundreds of years later. However, scholars have suggested that the *Gita* was originally a separate text from the *Mahabharata* and inserted into the longer epic later on. Conventionally, the *Mahabharata*'s composer is identified as Vyasa, an ancient, immortal, legendary poet who appears in the epic as the Pandavas' and Kauravas' grandfather and who ostensibly dictated it to the god Ganesha. Vyasa is said to have grown up in the forests of northern India as the son of a sage and the princess Satyavati, who was raised as a commoner by a fisherman. In the forests, hermits taught him the *Vedas*, the earliest Sanskrit scriptures of Hinduism, which he compiled and divided into their contemporary four-part form. Later in his life, Vyasa supposedly lived on the banks of the mythic Sarasvati river and in Himalayan caves, where the *Mahabharata* was ostensibly composed. Some branches of Hinduism consider him a worldly incarnation of Vishnu (like Krishna).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The *Mahabharata* (including the *Bhagavad Gita*) is a historical as well as literary and religious text, for no other records from the time of its composition survive to the present day. Scholars have widely debated the historical validity and circumstances of the Kurukshetra War between the Pandavas and the Kauravas; it is traditionally dated to 3137 BCE, although Western archaeologists often date it closer to 1000 BCE. By this time, large-scale political institutions had come to rule large swaths of territory in India and the caste system began to solidify as a central nexus of social division in India. The *Bhagavad Gita* concerns, and arguably advanced, both of these transformations. The present-day village of Jyotisar, which remains an important pilgrimage site, claims to include the battlefield on which Krishna's dialogue with Arjuna takes place.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The *Bhagavad Gita* forms a small portion of a longer Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*, which chronicles the long power struggle between the Pandava and Kaurava branches of the Bharata family. *The Ramayana*, which narrates the prince Rama's war to rescue his wife, Sita, after she is kidnapped by the demonic king Ravana, is the other major ancient Hindu epic

and centers philosophical themes similar to those that appear in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Bhagavad Gita* only comprises about 700 verses, whereas *The Ramayana* has about 24,000, and the entire *Mahabharata* has up to 100,000 (depending on the version—conventionally, Hindus believe that Vyasa's original version was much shorter and the text expanded throughout the ages). The most important ancient Hindu scriptures are the four *Vedas* (the *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda*, and *Atharvaveda*), considered the earliest Sanskrit texts, which teach devotional chants, sacrifices, foundational cultural practices, and religious philosophy of much the same sort Krishna elaborates for Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Thousands of commentaries on each of these texts have also appeared in the more than two thousand years since their composition.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Bhagavad Gita* ("Song of God")
- **When Written:** Version known to contemporary audiences likely compiled between 500-100 BCE
- **Where Written:** Likely in what is now northern India; some commentators believe it was written in a cave near the village of Badrinath.
- **When Published:** There are numerous editions of the *Gita*—many are embedded within versions of the *Mahabharata*, but others have been published independently. The standard, nineteen-volume Sanskrit Critical Edition of the *Mahabharata* (also called the Pune/Poona edition) was compiled between 1919 and 1966, but the earliest English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* appeared in 1785.
- **Literary Period:** Ancient Indian literature
- **Genre:** Epic poem, Hindu religious scripture, philosophical dialogue
- **Setting:** A battlefield in the kingdom of Hastinapura (present-day northern India)
- **Climax:** Krishna reveals his multitude of divine forms, convincing Arjuna to worship him and devote himself to the war
- **Antagonist:** Arjuna's ignorance and cowardice, the Kauravas, earthly reincarnation
- **Point of View:** Dialogue narrated by Sanjaya

EXTRA CREDIT

Gandhi and the Independence Movement. The *Bhagavad Gita* was arguably Mahatma Gandhi's central inspiration for the philosophy of nonviolent resistance he developed during the decades-long movement for Indian independence from the British colonial government. He called the book his "eternal

mother," turned to it for moral strength in times of despair, and even translated it into his native language, Gujarati.

Oppenheimer and Nuclear Weapons. Conversely, after watching the world's first nuclear explosion, "father of the atomic bomb" Robert Oppenheimer famously quoted Krishna in (an older translation of) the *Bhagavad Gita*: "I am become death, the destroyer of worlds." Oppenheimer, who studied Sanskrit and the *Gita* in his youth, was much more of a pacifist than his job description would suggest; his horror at the destructive power of the atomic weapons he created led him to campaign against their continued development later in his life.



PLOT SUMMARY

The *Bhagavad Gita* forms a section of the sixth book of the *Mahabharata*, an important Sanskrit epic in the Hindu tradition that recounts a lengthy struggle and brief war between two sides of the Bharata family—the Pandavas and the Kauravas—over their kingdom of Hastinapura. The *Gita* recounts a dialogue in the moments leading up to the war between the Pandava warrior Arjuna and his charioteer and trusted advisor, Krishna, who turns out to be a worldly incarnation of Vishnu, a god who serves as the Supreme Being in many forms of Hinduism. However, Arjuna and Krishna's dialogue is actually recounted through a frame story: Sanjaya, an advisor to Dhritarashtra (the Kauravas' father and the blind king of Hastinapura), reports this dialogue to the king after the Pandavas have already won the war.

In the first of the *Gita*'s eighteen sections or discourses, Sanjaya describes the extensive Pandava and Kaurava armies that meet to fight on the "field of dharma." While the Kauravas have more men, the Pandavas seem to have the gods' favor, as they respond to the Kauravas' impressive conch horns with divine ones that shake the earth and sky. As Krishna drives Arjuna's chariot into the middle of the battlefield, Arjuna realizes that he cannot bear to kill his cousins, which he believes would destroy the dharma, or moral standing, of his entire family and poison any pleasure he might derive from victory. He lowers his weapon and begins to weep.

Krishna reprimands Arjuna at the beginning of the second discourse, calling him a coward and suggesting that he is blind to the fundamental truth that people's souls do not die with their bodies. Rather, the eternal soul is reincarnated in another body, so Arjuna should not grieve for his family members but instead follow his dharma as a kshatriya (warrior) by fighting. If he wins the war, Arjuna will rule the earth; if he loses, he will ascend to heaven; but if he refuses to fight, he will disgrace himself. In addition to grasping these truths intellectually, Krishna says that people can learn to stop clinging to the fruits of action, turn away from the false realm of the senses, and free themselves from negative emotions by practicing yoga. Each of

these routes promises to help people dissolve their sense of self, transcend the material world, and blissfully reunite with the absolute being called Brahman.

In the third discourse, Arjuna asks why Krishna wants him to act if he believes that enlightenment comes from restraining one's impulse to action. Krishna argues that everyone must act by virtue of being in the world, but that these actions are the workings of material elements called gunas rather than the will of the individual soul. The only pure form of action is sacrifice to the gods, which leads the gods to sustain human life on earth.

Krishna begins to reveal his true nature to Arjuna in the fourth discourse: he is eternal, intervenes in the universe whenever necessary to maintain dharma, and dedicates himself to those who perform sacrifices for him—especially those who sacrifice their knowledge by surrendering it to him.

In the fifth discourse, Arjuna notes that the renunciation of action (samnyasa) and yoga (which is a form of action) seem to be opposites, yet Krishna considers both as viable means to enlightenment. Krishna replies that yoga is a means to renunciation, because it allows people to overcome their ignorant motivations for action. In the sixth discourse, Krishna explains that this meditative yogic discipline allows people to understand their unity in Brahman with all other beings, which can lead them to transcend the cycle of rebirth (samsara) or, at the very least, reincarnate into purer bodies.

In the seventh discourse, Krishna explains that he truly encompasses everything, from all the material things that comprise the earth to his higher being, the force that creates and dissolves the world. His true being is formless, timeless, and beyond all dualities; he loves the wise few who understand these fundamentals. In discourse eight, Krishna suggests that people can transcend rebirth and join him directly if they learn to fix their minds on him constantly, and particularly at the moment of death. The ninth discourse expands on Krishna's all-pervasive nature, absolute power over the world, and providence over those who worship him.

In the tenth and eleventh discourses, Krishna turns from an intellectual explanation of his power to concrete demonstrations of it. The god professes his love for Arjuna, who in return acknowledges him as the highest being of all and asks about his divine forms. Krishna begins to enumerate these forms, declaring himself the greatest of each kind of thing, person, and force that exists in the world as well as the characteristics in virtue of which such kinds exist at all—he is wisdom among the wise and authority among rulers, silence among the hidden and "the ancient seed of all beings." But Krishna's numerous descriptions barely scratch the surface of his infinite power; he shows himself to Krishna in the eleventh discourse, taking on a form with innumerable eyes, mouths, and limbs that seems to contain everything, including infinite light, all the Bharata warriors, the entire world, and all the other gods. Arjuna worships Krishna with shock and fear, apologizing

for his ignorance and asking the “Incomparable One” for mercy and patience. Krishna notes that nobody—not even the gods—has seen this form before.

After securing Arjuna’s eternal fealty, Krishna goes on to explain that it is easier for devotees to worship his embodied forms than to grasp his true, formless self and offers practical advice for Hindus of different dispositions in his twelfth discourse. In the thirteenth, he distinguishes the body from the eternal, immaterial soul that bears various bodies on its way to enlightenment. The gunas that comprise the body and bind the soul to it—sattva (purity), rajas (passion), and tamas (ignorance)—are the subject of Krishna’s fourteenth discourse. By relinquishing rajas and tamas for the sake of sattva, people can rise up toward disembodiment through the cycle of reincarnation (*samsara*). Krishna begins the following discourse with the image of a holy **ashvattha tree** whose roots can be severed by “the strong axe / of non-clinging”—again, by relinquishing one’s attachments to action, one can overcome even the most firmly rooted connections to the world and integrate oneself into the indestructible, eternal spirit that lies behind apparent reality.

In his sixteenth discourse, Krishna distinguishes characteristics of the divine person nearing enlightenment—like truthfulness, self-control, discipline, compassion, and courage—from those of greedy, angry, demonic people who turn away from Vedic laws and elevate desire above God. Arjuna asks Krishna to elaborate on Vedic rituals in the seventeenth discourse, and the Lord tells him that sattvic people perform sacrifices according to Vedic law in order to honor the gods and without any simultaneous material goals. He also outlines three forms of food, bodily discipline, and gift-giving in accordance with the three gunas.

In the final discourse, Krishna emphasizes the distinction between renouncing all action—which usually happens *because of* desire—and acting for action’s sake, without an attachment to consequences or desires. People who can relinquish this interest in the fruits of action are called tyagis, and in their actions, they perceive all beings as eternal dimensions of the same unified whole, following their dharma fearlessly and steadfastly. He notes that dharma often follows one’s position in the caste system—which in turn reflects people’s inner nature—and emphasizes that one must fulfill this prescribed role, even if imperfectly, in order to purify oneself.

Accordingly, Krishna implores Arjuna once again to fight the war but reminds him that the decision is his alone. Finally, Krishna requests Arjuna’s absolute devotion and charges him with spreading the *Gita*’s message to those sufficiently disciplined and devoted to properly receive “this highest, hidden truth.” Arjuna resolutely agrees; in the *Gita*’s closing lines, the minister Sanjaya expresses his gratitude and enthusiasm at hearing Krishna’s words and declares that Arjuna is blessed to bring “splendor, / victory, well-being, / and

wise conduct” wherever he goes, which suggests that the Pandavas are destined to win back Hastinapura.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Arjuna – The central protagonist of the *Mahabharata* and one of the two primary characters in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna is a Pandava warrior who fights his cousins, the Kauravas, over his kingdom of Hastinapura. Pandava literally means “son of Pandu,” but the king Pandu was cursed to die if he ever slept with a woman, so his wife Kunti asked the gods to impregnate her. Accordingly, Arjuna’s true parents are Kunti and the warrior god Indra. After realizing that he has to fight these cousins on the battlefield, Arjuna turns to his charioteer Krishna for advice, and the entire *Bhagavad Gita* recounts their lengthy dialogue about dharma, action and renunciation, reincarnation, and enlightenment. At first, Arjuna is captivated by Krishna’s wisdom, but he soon discovers that Krishna is a manifestation of God and proclaims absolute fidelity to him, absorbing his teachings over the course of the *Gita*. After his dialogue with Krishna, Arjuna ultimately wins the war for the Pandavas.

Krishna – Arjuna’s charioteer Krishna is actually a worldly manifestation of God (also known as Vishnu or the Supreme Being). He speaks the vast majority of the verses in the *Bhagavad Gita*, convincing Arjuna to go on with the battle by suggesting that he must perform his dharma as a warrior and should not fear the deaths of his family members and enemies, the Kauravas, because the true self of all beings is an immortal, formless soul. In the *Gita*’s tenth and eleventh discourses, Krishna reveals his multitude of divine forms to Arjuna, first by listing them and then in a stunning visual spectacle that captures the entire world and demonstrates his infinite power with a light that Sanjaya compares to “a thousand suns.” Krishna is either identical to or the source of the absolute, unitary being known as Brahman, and according to the *Gita*, Hindus should seek to overcome the cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*) to join themselves with Krishna through yoga or devotion.

Sanjaya – Dhritarashtra’s minister, who was present during the battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas and overheard the entire dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna. He later reports this conversation to the king, and his conversation with Dhritarashtra forms a frame story around the *Bhagavad Gita*’s eighteen discourses. At the end of the *Gita*, Sanjaya proclaims an ecstatic wonder at Krishna’s revelations and suggests that Arjuna is destined to win the war over Hastinapura.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Dhritarashtra – The blind king of Hastinapura and father to the Kauravas. Sanjaya, the king’s minister, narrates the entirety of

the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna to Dhritarashtra.

Vyasa – The sagacious, immortal poet who composed the *Mahabharata* and appears throughout it. Krishna declares that, among the wise, he is Vyasa.

Duryodhana – The eldest son of the Kauravas and leader of their forces against the Pandavas.

Bhima – Arjuna's younger brother, a powerful Pandava warrior who leads his family's forces into battle.

Bhishma – The great-uncle of the entire Bharata clan, Bhishma sides with the Kauravas and leads them into battle at the beginning of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

TERMS

Hastinapura – The kingdom of the Bharata family, which the Pandavas and Kauravas fight over in the *Mahabharata*.

Bharata – The royal family that the Pandavas and Kauravas all belong to (also often known as the Kuru family).

Pandavas – **Arjuna**'s side of the Bharata family, who are battling their cousins (the Kauravas) to take back Hastinapura in the set-up to the *Bhagavad Gita*. The Pandavas are all "sons" of the king Pandu, but actually fathered by various gods who impregnate their mother, Kunti. They share a wife, Draupadi, who is a central character in the *Mahabharata*.

Kauravas – The side of the Bharata family that opposes **Arjuna** and the Pandavas. The Kauravas descend from the blind king **Dhritarashtra**, to whom **Sanjaya** narrates the *Bhagavad Gita*. At the beginning of the text, they outnumber the Pandavas, and Arjuna describes them as bloodthirsty.

Dharma – A central concept in Hindu philosophy, and arguably the central concept in the *Bhagavad Gita*, dharma is a moral code of behavior that follows from one's sacred duty to the gods, other people, and the universe. Over the course of the text, **Arjuna** learns to follow his dharma as a warrior, despite his initial worry that his dharma as a member of the Bharata family should prevent him from killing his cousins, the Kauravas. Following one's dharma, or acting ethically, means performing in accord with one's position in the world and coming closer to the divine; this is generally a function of one's caste position. Vishnu often enters the material world (here, in the form of **Krishna**) to restore dharma in the universe.

Yoga – Often translated as "discipline" or "spiritual path," yoga is a practice of deliberate, intense devotional engagement that usually involves meditation. (This sense of yoga far exceeds yoga's usual connotations in the West as a form of exercise). In the *Bhagavad Gita*, **Krishna** discusses the yoga of action (karma yoga), in which people learn to rein in their senses and desires so that they can act for the sake of dharma rather than clinging to the fruits of action. Krishna also discusses the yoga of insight or knowledge (samkhya), in which people meditate on the truth

of their eternal self's identity with the formlessness of Brahman in order to banish their ignorance and transcend the cycle of reincarnation upon death.

Karma – Sanskrit term for action. "Yoga of action" is a translation of "karma yoga."

Samkhya – A form of philosophical knowledge that entails understanding everything in the universe, including the difference between the eternal self and the gunas that comprise material things.

Samnyasa – The renunciation of action.

Bhakti – A Sanskrit term for devotional worship, which **Krishna** asks of **Arjuna** in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Bhakti allows Hindus to resolve moral conflicts by turning to a higher power through disciplined, emotional rituals that establish a relation of mutual love and devotion between a human and the gods.

Gunas – The three component forms or "threads" that comprise all material things: sattva, rajas, and tamas. The physical world and the bodies that a soul inhabits over time are composed of the three gunas in various balances. The soul's attachment to these gunas leads it to reincarnation in the material world, and transcending the body to join **Krishna** requires the soul to abandon all attachment to the gunas through the cycle of samsara, or the cycle of birth and death.

Sattva – The highest and lightest of the gunas, *sattva* is the quality of truthfulness, lucidity, or purity in things that leads people to worship the gods trustfully, act without clinging to consequences or desires, and find joy in one's insight about the interconnection of all selves. A tendency toward sattva leads people toward a transcendental dissolution of the self and the end of the samsara cycle. (The adjective form of *sattva* is "sattvic.")

Rajas – The guna of passion, *rajas* attaches the soul to action's consequences, leading people toward greed and distancing them from wisdom. (The adjective form of *rajas* is "rajasic.")

Tamas – The darkest and heaviest of the gunas, *tamas* is connected to ignorance, laziness, and neglect. Those governed by *tamas* tend to reincarnate downward, into inferior bodies, and act destructively, forgetting the gods and religious obligations. (The adjective form of *tamas* is "tamsaic.")

Brahman – The interconnected, imperishable, unitary force of being that animates everything in the universe. Brahman is identical with atman (the individual self) and created by **Krishna**, who calls it his "womb" and explains that the world sprung out of it. Brahman supersedes the worldly distinction between being and non-being, pervading everything despite its immateriality and immortality. Transcending samsara, or the cycle of death and rebirth, requires insight into (and yogic meditation on) Brahman, which allows people to realize their own unity with Brahman and eventually shed their material bodies to dissolve fully into it. Brahman is often considered the

Hindu equivalent of the conventional Western concept of God as a prime mover. It is distinct from “brahmin,” which is a Hindu caste.

Atman – The individual self or soul that moves through samsara (the cycle of reincarnation). Atman is a component of Brahman, as its being is connected to that of all other things, and recognizing this fact can lead the individual to transcend samsara.

Samsara – The cycle of birth and death (also known as reincarnation or transmigration) in which the eternal self (atman) participates until it forfeits all attachment to the gunas, recognizes its unity with Brahman, and achieves transcendence, incorporating itself into God.

Om/Aum – An sacred syllable and mantra (chant) with various religious meanings, which is ostensibly the highest of all sounds. **Krishna** encourages devotees to chant “om tat sat” (“om is the truth”) during their discipline and sacrifices to demonstrate their awareness of Brahman.

Vedas – The four oldest and often most authoritative Hindu scriptures, generally considered direct revelations from Brahma (the creator god) and dated to approximately 1,000 years before the *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad Gita*.

Tyagi – A sage who successfully abandons any attachment to the fruit of actions, a tyagi is the highest kind of human being and destined to join Brahman upon death.

Caste System – The Hindu caste system, or social order, consists of four categories: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. The outcaste, or untouchables, exist outside of (and below) the caste system.

Brahmin – The highest Hindu caste, traditionally composed of priests and teachers.

Kshatriya – The second-highest Hindu caste, traditionally composed of warriors and statesmen.

Vaishya – The third Hindu caste, traditionally composed of merchants, farmers, and artisans.

Shudra – The fourth Hindu caste, traditionally composed of servants and manual laborers.

Outcaste – Also known as untouchables or pariahs, those outside and therefore below the caste system.



DETACHMENT AND DHARMA

The *Bhagavad Gita* forms part of the sixth book of the *Mahabharata*, an ancient Sanskrit epic that recounts a war between two sides of the Bharata family—the Pandavas and Kauravas—over their kingdom of Hastinapura.

At the beginning of the *Gita*, as the Pandava warrior Arjuna prepares for battle, he grows despondent after realizing that he will have to kill his cousins and friends.

Fortunately, his charioteer Krishna turns out to be a worldly incarnation of Vishnu, one of Hinduism’s most important gods, who is generally credited with preserving the world by intervening in human affairs to sustain dharma, or the proper moral order of the universe. (Many forms of Hinduism, including the most pervasive form, consider Vishnu the primary god and source of all others, and the *Gita* is often employed to support such interpretations.) Krishna persuades Arjuna to fight by arguing that people should undertake action only in accordance with their own proper station in life, rather than because of their emotional attachments, desire for a particular outcome, or fear of error. By persuading Arjuna that his true dharma is to fight as a warrior, Krishna convinces him to pick up his weapon and go on with the battle, as well as suggesting to all Hindus that they should prioritize their social obligations in their everyday decision-making rather than, as he puts it, clinging to the fruits of action.

Arjuna is afraid to fight because of his emotional attachment to the Kauravas, who are his cousins but also his enemies in the war over Hastinapura. At the beginning of the *Gita*, after coming face-to-face with them on the battlefield, Arjuna breaks down, realizing that he values his family above the kingship and would take no pleasure in fighting them. He conceives his dharma in terms of family: he believes that killing his cousins would undermine his entire family’s moral standing. But, when Krishna confronts him at the beginning of the second discourse, Arjuna admits that his vision of dharma is clouded by his sense of pity and anticipation of grief. Krishna argues that, as a warrior charged with defending his kingdom and honor, Arjuna is ethically required to kill his cousins and disregard in his reservations.

Krishna first argues that ethical action must be undertaken for its own sake, rather than because of any prospective benefit or emotional attachment on the part of the actor. He explains that the soul is eternal and the body inevitably dies one way or another, so killing another does not truly mean destroying their true self (which lies in the soul). Moreover, because pain and pleasure are mere sensory feelings, which reside in the worldly lower self rather than the higher eternal self, they should not influence action; indeed, Krishna wants Arjuna to free himself from all dualities like pleasure and pain, and instead the unity of all being (Brahman). Moreover, to Krishna, worldly actions do not result from any individual intention on the part of the actor, but rather simply the interplay of the gunas, the qualities or



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

strands of matter that make up the physical world. For all of these reasons, an enlightened person or tyagi does not decide what to do based on their senses, emotional biases, or expectations about what will result from action—in Krishna’s words, a tyagi does not “cling to the fruits of action” but rather realizes that their true self does not control their actions and therefore relinquishes a sense of ownership over them. Accordingly, if Arjuna were to defeat the Kauravas, he would not truly be responsible for their deaths, for the body that kills is not his true self and the bodies he kills are not the Kauravas’ true selves.

Instead, the moral rightness of action consists in following dharma, a sacred moral code of individual action based in one’s duties to others and the gods, which is necessary to maintain balance in the universe. While Krishna’s arguments against action for the sake of worldly ends might seem to suggest that people should relinquish all action altogether, he rejects this solution because it is simply impossible to avoid action—a living being is always compelled to action by the gunas, refusing to act actually means clinging to inaction (usually out of fear), and some actions (like eating and performing religious rituals) are entirely worth taking. Therefore, a tyagi must continue to act, but not for the sake of any desired end. Rather, they must learn to recognize and perform their duties without fear, passion, or desire; they act simply for the sake of duty (dharma) and devotion to the Supreme Being (which, of course, Krishna incarnates in the *Gita*). All of the tyagi’s actions are forms of sacrifice to the divine. Specifically, this dharma is a function of social context and caste (the traditional system of social stratification that divides families into brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas, and shudras). In the final discourse of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna explains that caste expresses someone’s nature, or the balance of the three gunas in their body, which carries over from their previous lives; the warrior’s dharma consists of fighting valiantly in battle. Arjuna violates this dharma by refusing to fight and risks bringing “eternal disgrace” upon himself. But Krishna suggests that, should he choose to fight, Arjuna stands to enter heaven if he dies and rule the earth if he lives.

Arjuna’s initial reluctance to fight demonstrates that he falsely blamed himself for the duty to which he was called by the divine and failed to recognize the fundamental nature of the self as eternally unchanging; Arjuna was unaware of his true dharma, and Krishna’s intervention serves to demonstrate the true nature of dharma. Accordingly, in the closing verse of his dialogue with Krishna, Arjuna agrees to fight, thanking the god for helping him focus his thinking and overcome his previous state of ignorance and confusion. By realizing that his actions are not his own and learning about the true nature of the self, Arjuna gains the courage and mental clarity he needs to act in accordance with his dharma, putting aside his worldly attachments to the Kauravas. In turn, Arjuna’s realization

suggests that all Hindus should undergo a parallel one by learning about their true dharma and abandoning their false attachments to pleasure, status, and the outcomes of action in order to act for the sake of the gods alone.



KRISHNA, THE ABSOLUTE, AND HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

Throughout the first half of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna gradually reveals his all-encompassing power to Arjuna. He is a conduit for the supreme god Vishnu, who takes on a human form periodically throughout history in order to maintain moral balance in the universe. Krishna fully demonstrates his universality in the tenth and eleventh discourses, spelling out dozens of his divine forms before stunning Arjuna with a dazzling visual display that seems to swallow up the entire earth. Krishna is not merely an all-powerful being, but in fact transcends the distinction between being and non-being altogether, standing outside and above the material world as its creator and benefactor. By revealing himself, Krishna seeks to demonstrate the absolute underlying unity of all things and the falsity of all dualities. The *Gita* teaches people that, by meditating on this truth of absolute unity, they may learn to join themselves with that absolute.

Krishna has absolute power: he is eternal, he created all beings, and he pervades everything. At the beginning of the fourth discourse, Arjuna asks how Krishna could have told the sun-god about yoga, since the sun-god came first. Krishna explains that he is eternal, capable of bringing himself into being, and later repeatedly states that he has no beginning, middle, or end. He created humans’ ancestors and in fact everything that exists, comparing himself to a father who planted the seeds of being. He also proclaims that he sustains all beings and claims responsibility for natural phenomena like the sun’s light. Krishna is part of everything, and things “in the realm of the living” are mere fragments of his totality. All of Krishna’s relationships with the world are unidirectional: he changes the world but is not changed by it, the gunas are in him but he does not have them, and he controls all action but does not himself act.

Krishna is not merely an absolutely powerful being, but in fact the absolute itself, which exceeds the distinction between being and non-being. This absolute is formless, which means that humans can only ever encounter a limited incarnation of Krishna—none of the forms that Arjuna encounters can fully encapsulate his infinity. In the tenth discourse, Krishna elaborates these myriad forms at length. Of each categories he mentions, he is generally the greatest (the god of war among army chiefs, the ocean among waters) or the very quality in virtue of which that category can exist (he is wisdom among wise beings, discourse among speakers). But this catalogue is not exhaustive, for Vishnu’s forms are infinite, and he is not a being but rather that in virtue of which there is anything at all.

In the eleventh discourse, Krishna reveals his divine forms in another way, manifesting them directly before Arjuna, who needs the “divine eye” to see them. Arjuna realizes that he can see Krishna everywhere and the whole world inside Krishna; Krishna incorporates all the gods and the light of the world, collapsing the distinction between earth and sky. In awe of this power, Arjuna realizes his ignorance and devotes himself completely to Krishna, whom he calls “Incomparable One.” After revealing himself, Krishna admits that he has only shown a minuscule portion of his power, but he suggests that such a fragment of his own brilliance is all that the entire world needs to sustain itself. In reality, his self and power are invisible, for they are formless, transcending all distinctions, bodies, and appearances. Krishna insists throughout that he transcends duality, including the opposition between being and non-being. So does the Brahman (absolute universal reality) that, depending on one’s interpretation, Krishna either created, is identical to, or both.

In the following discourse, Arjuna wonders whether people should worship Krishna’s human manifestation or his true, formless self. Krishna argues that, while it is always easier for beings to worship his concrete manifestations, they can still grasp his true nature through the intellect and reflection on the self. This is because beings themselves have a part that comes from this absolute, and by gaining an awareness of it, they can grasp both Krishna and themselves in their formless, true states. This true human self or spirit (*atman*) is identical with the universal being (Brahman) that Krishna calls the “womb” for all material beings. Krishna explains that everything begins in the formless and returns to the formless, “imperishable,” eternal state that he embodies. By discarding one’s attachments to objects, one can join Krishna in this eternal state, which is why he encourages Arjuna to restrict his connection to his body, renounce worldly pleasures, and retreat into the supreme self through meditation. Krishna sees a tension between worshipping formless and embodied versions of the absolute because the formless version is true but the embodied version is more accessible to most people and therefore can offer them a route to perceive the formless truth. However, the fact that Vishnu must show himself to Arjuna in an embodied form—first by appearing as Krishna, and secondly by the brilliant revelation in the eleventh discourse—demonstrates that humans can more easily come to know the truth of being’s absolute unity by first perceiving worldly components and then grasping it in its entirety through yogic discipline.

Although Krishna’s universal form frightens Arjuna at first, it is not his true self (for he is actually formless) but rather merely expresses his absolute power. This leads Arjuna to realize that he, too, can potentially overcome his ties to the material world, sacrificing his worldly body to reintegrate into the formless unity of all things—human and divine, benevolent and evil,

being and nonbeing—that is the only true reality. The *Gita* encourages its listeners and readers to follow a similar path, learning to perceive the formless through encounters with the unfathomable power of the universe.

REINCARNATION AND THE SELF



In the *Bhagavad Gita*, human beings—and all worldly creatures—have two components, which are variously described as matter and mind, the body and the eternal self (*atman*), or the “sacred ground” and that which knows the sacred ground. An eternal self sheds various bodies but in fact remains unchanged, as this absolute component is born from Krishna (as a conduit for Vishnu) and destined to return to him after completing the cycle of reincarnation known as *samsara*. Krishna shows Arjuna that humans should aim precisely to advance their souls along this cycle by shedding their attachment to the gunas (the constituent parts of matter that bind this soul to various bodies) and reincarnating into progressively holier bodies until they transcend reincarnation altogether and are reincorporated into absolute being.

Krishna explains that all beings are the union of an eternal self and a body. The body, which he also calls the “sacred ground” of knowledge, involves the senses, desires, self-awareness, pleasure, and even thought. It is a mere vessel, which is why Krishna sees nothing wrong with Arjuna killing his family members in accordance with his dharma. All matter, including bodies, is composed of three material forces called gunas: sattva, which brings joy and wisdom; rajas, which brings passion and greed; and tamas, which brings confusion, laziness, and neglect. The more sattva composes a body, the closer the eternal self occupying that body gets to reincarnation. This higher, “supreme self” is pure, free from sensory pleasures and desire, averse to a “sense of ‘mine,’” and eternal—it approximates the Western notion of an immortal soul.

In reincarnation, the eternal self continues from body to body unchanged, carrying its past attachment to gunas with it. By entering different bodies, the eternal self partakes in the gunas, although it is not composed of them. One is only reborn at all because the eternal self clings to various gunas from past lives; Krishna compares the way the eternal self sheds bodies to the way people shed old clothing. Krishna governs reincarnation, placing those who lived demonically in demonic wombs and offering the wise progressively purer bodies as they move toward enlightenment—for instance, he suggests that someone dedicated to yoga can be reborn in a family of yoga practitioners, which would offer them a better opportunity to practice yoga in the next life and move closer still to the divine. As a result of reincarnation, one need not achieve enlightenment in one’s present life to be rewarded for their devotion to God; rather, one can move progressively closer to him, finding a purer body in each new cycle of life.

By living well and eventually achieving this divine purity, a soul eventually supersedes reincarnation altogether: it becomes liberated from any material body and moves entirely outside the cycle of death and rebirth to join Krishna in an “imperishable place” beyond life and death. Once one is purified of rajas and tamas (the lower gunas), the self eventually dissolves into pure Brahman, losing all sense of individuality. According to Krishna, this dissolution brings endless pleasure and the cessation of consciousness, allowing the soul to overcome all dualities. Notably, this transcendence is desirable because it follows logically from basic features of the *Gita*’s worldview—namely, the nonidentity between the true self and the body, the ephemerality of such bodies, and the inevitability of destruction and death—rather than because it is “good” in any conventional moral sense. Instead, pursuing the good—which includes embodying virtues like patience and humility—is a mere means to these ultimate truths. Krishna uses this promise of transcendence through virtue to persuade Arjuna to return to battle. At the beginning of the *Gita*, Arjuna worries that killing his family will doom his ancestors to fall from heaven, but Krishna convinces him that fighting actually offers his own only chance at heaven (even if he dies, he will be reincarnated in a superior body).

By centering reincarnation and the promise of eventual transcendence, Krishna shows Arjuna—and other wavering mortals—that they stand to become divine themselves if they learn to live morally. Since the *Gita*, this belief in reincarnation and its ultimate transcendence through moral ways of life has remained a staple of Hindu religious tradition. Regardless of one’s present ethical composition, there is always something to be gained by turning to the divine and ridding oneself of the vicious lower gunas, even if doing so only promises to move the soul one step closer to transcendence.

FORMS OF WORSHIP



Once Arjuna learns that Krishna is an incarnation of the Supreme Being (Vishnu), their discussion turns to how one might properly honor the divine and elevate one’s own self toward it. Although various readers of the *Gita* have argued that it holds one particular kind of worship supreme above all others, Krishna clearly argues that there are myriad paths to enlightenment, and the crucial three routes are those of knowledge, action, and devotion. These paths are differently suited to different worshippers, depending on their personal character and dharma, and Krishna repays each kind of worship with reciprocal action, knowledge, or love. Ultimately, then, worship allows people to purify themselves by establishing a personal relationship with the divine. The *Gita* offers the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna as a lens through which readers can begin forming their own relationships of this sort.

Krishna elaborates multiple kinds of worship, all of which can

lead believers to him, and which take three general forms: devotion, knowledge, and action. A worshipper can accept Krishna as their only source of solace from the world’s travails, honoring him continually through prayers and chants. This is the path of devotion. Alternatively, a person can achieve liberation by meditating on truth, realizing that they are merely a component of the selfless universal soul, and thereby willfully renouncing the senses; by constantly thinking about the unity of all things, they can become united with that absolute unity upon their death. This is the path of knowledge. Finally, one can learn to give up the fruits of action, whether by acting only for Krishna’s sake or by elevating dharma above desire, and Krishna calls this the surest route to peace. This is the path of action. There are forms of yoga, or mindful discipline, that facilitate all three forms of worship: at various points in the *Gita*, Krishna talks about the yoga of action (which involves restraining action), the yoga of knowledge (which involves meditation and reflection), and the yoga of devotion (which can involve chants like “Om tat sat,” or “Om is the truth”).

However, these forms of worship are not created equally, nor are they equally suited for different worshippers—people are likely to find success with different strategies, and some are more promising than others. In the twelfth discourse, Krishna explains that the path of knowledge is both the purest and most strenuous means to liberation because it is incredibly difficult to perceive something formless and relatively easier to worship Krishna by proxy, through one of his worldly forms. Later in the same discourse, he suggests that followers who cannot practice one form of worship should take up another; yoga, for instance, can train people to better fixate on truth, but those who cannot undertake yoga can still move toward purity by acting without regard for ends. Krishna also sees that, depending on people’s dharma, there are different paths to enlightenment—he expects brahmins to be better at reflection and thinks that those controlled by the vile guna of tamas can improve themselves merely by obeying Vedic law, even if they do not understand it or follow it for the wrong reasons, since this is an improvement above their current moral state. Similarly, at the end of the thirteenth discourse, he explains that people can achieve unity with the universal through any of the three paths, even if they remain unacquainted with the two methods of worship they do not employ.

Crucially, besides advancing one on the path to heaven, worshipping Krishna earns one reciprocal action, knowledge, or devotion on his behalf. Actions of sacrifice sustain a mutual relationship between humans and the gods, for through sacrifice humans “cause the gods to be”—whether in a cultural or literal sense is unclear—and the gods “cause you [humans] to be” through their power. As an example, Krishna explains that humans’ sacrificial rituals cause the rains, which allow humans to eat, therefore sustaining their continued existence. Knowledge of Krishna is also knowledge about the self and the

gunas in which it partakes, so meditation allows one to “see the self / in the self, / through the self.” Finally, Krishna loves back those who love him. At the end of the *Gita*, Krishna affirms that Arjuna is “greatly loved by [him]” and holds the Pandava warrior in his favor, which likely contributes to the Pandavas’ eventual victory in the war over Hastinapura. But Krishna also charges Arjuna with spreading his message to those appropriately conditioned to receive it, including passing on his teachings and helping others memorize their conversation. In this declaration, the *Gita* articulates its own purpose as a foundational religious text by imploring the reader to study and follow Krishna’s teachings to Arjuna.

Ultimately, Krishna does not offer a one-size-fits-all solution to enlightenment but rather encourages individuals to worship in a way that fits their own personal disposition, commitments, and access to knowledge. The *Gita* teaches that all worship still eventually leads to the dissolution of the self into the abstract, universal reality of Brahman, but dissolving that self relies precisely on the self’s moral standing in the present.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



ASHVATTHA TREE

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *ashvattha* fig tree symbolizes both the eternal self and the embodied self. *Ashvattha* trees continue to serve an important religious function in Buddhism and Hinduism, in which they are sometimes associated with the eternal being of Brahman, in part because they tend to grow outward in all directions and can accordingly survive for many centuries—this may explain why Krishna states that the tree’s form and lifespan are unknowable in this world. In addition, the indistinguishability of its roots and branches may explain why he first declares that the tree is inverted, its roots growing upwards and its branches into the ground, before claiming that the branches grow “below and above” while “the roots are stretched below.” In this passage from the *Gita*, the tree is a symbol of this-worldly human life. This is why Krishna thinks that people should sever the tree’s roots with “the strong axe / of non-clinging;” the tree’s branches grow in the gunas and human actions grow from its roots. This suggests that severing its roots means relinquishing human action and even the visible human self for the sake of the imperishable eternal self that lies behind worldly appearances.

Yet, when he enumerates his divine forms in the tenth discourse, Krishna declares himself the *ashvattha* among all trees, which associates it with the eternal rather than the embodied self. Perhaps these competing interpretations of the

ashvattha tree are reconcilable: if the self is truly identical with Brahman (but is unaware of this identity), then one must sever the apparent self in order to recognize the eternal self; alternatively, Krishna may simply be the *ashvattha* among trees because of its particularly holy nature, and not because it directly stands for Brahman.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Bhagavad Gita* published in 2008.

Discourse 1 Quotes

¶¶ The great cry
tore the hearts
of the Sons
of Dhritarashtra
the tumult
made the sky
and the earth
resound.

Related Characters: Sanjaya (speaker), Dhritarashtra , Arjuna

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

As the Pandavas and Kauravas line up on the battlefield, each side blows conch horns as a declaration of their presence, a show of force, and perhaps also an appeal to the gods. The Kauravas’ horns cause a commotion that pales in comparison to this earthshaking tumult emanating from the Pandavas’ divine horns.

Although Arjuna has not even begun to question his dharma at this stage in the *Gita*, the world’s response to his horn (and those of his brothers and allies) foreshadows Krishna’s favor to him and suggests that, despite their inferior forces, the Pandavas are divinely ordained to win the war. Indeed, when Krishna later shows his divine form, he unites the earth and sky as the world trembles, which recalls this moment. In both cases, the will of the divine becomes manifest through the responses of the physical and celestial worlds.

॥ I see no good
in killing
my people
in battle,
Lovely-Haired Krishna!

Krishna, I long
neither for victory
nor kingship
nor pleasures.
Lord of the Cows,
what is kingship to us,
what are delights,
or life itself?

Related Characters: Arjuna (speaker), Krishna

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

As he stands between the two sides of his family (both literally and symbolically), Arjuna realizes that he cannot bring himself to kill the Kauravas, even though doing so would make him Hastinapura's ruler. Arjuna does not want power and revenge like his cousins and brothers, which shows that he is not driven by the worldly desires that Krishna later connects to the guna of rajas, or passion. However, he still assumes that these would be the only valid reasons to fight. Moreover, Arjuna's reluctance to act comes from his emotional attachment to his family, which Krishna soon explicates as merely another form of clinging to the material world. Indeed, for Krishna, even "life itself" is not inherently valuable, for all bodies die, and the only true measure of a person is their moral orientation toward dharma.

॥ The *dharma* of caste,
and the eternal *dharma*
of family,
are uprooted
by these wrongful acts
of family-destroyers,
since they create
a blending of caste.

Related Characters: Arjuna (speaker), Krishna

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

As Arjuna explains his anguish to Krishna, he begins to couch his opposition to the war in terms of dharma: he worries that he will violate his family's dharma by killing his cousins (although it is unclear why that dharma was not violated long ago, when the family first splintered). In turn, he fears that this will destroy the dharma of caste, which fighting his family would wrongly "blend." This is because caste is inherited through family, so destroying the integrity of one's family and its traditions would presumably also destroy one's caste identity.

This passage demonstrates that, while Arjuna already understands that proper action means following dharma at the outset of the *Bhagavad Gita*, he fails to understand the true basis of dharma. In the verses before this passage, he prioritizes the dharma of his family above all else: he conceives himself as a member of the Bharata family first and a warrior second, which violates Krishna's view that family ties are based on meaningless worldly attachment while caste obligations extend from the composition of gunas that makes up the nature of one's body. So, while Arjuna does recognize dharma's connection to caste in this passage, he falsely sees family as the source of caste. Krishna eventually demonstrates that caste reflects the transmigrating self's true moral standing and one's family is merely a worldly tool to help one fulfill one's caste-based dharma (for instance, he says that he might reward a struggling but dedicated yoga practitioner by ensuring that they are reborn into a family that practices yoga).

Discourse 2 Quotes

॥ Son of Bharata,
the embodied self
which exists in the body
of everyone
is eternally
free from harm;
so you should not grieve
for any living beings.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

After Arjuna collapses in grief and turns to him for advice at the start of the second discourse, Krishna begins to explain that Arjuna must detach himself from worldly commitments and emotions in order to act for the only valid reason: the dutiful fulfillment of dharma as a sacrifice to the gods. In this passage, he gestures to the difference between the eternal soul and the material body that forms the centerpiece of the *Gita*'s picture of human life, outlining the fallacy in worrying about the pain and death of living beings when all that truly matters is the fate of the eternal soul, "the embodied self" that takes on various bodies through time but is fundamentally distinct from them and always finds another home after the body's death (whether in another body or in eternal unity with Brahman).

॥ Your authority is
in action alone,
and never
in its fruits;
motive should never be
in the fruits of action,
nor should you cling
to inaction.

Abiding in yoga,
engage in actions!
Let go of clinging,
and let fulfilment
and frustration
be the same;
for it is said
yoga is equanimity.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Krishna begins to explain what proper action entails: one must act not for the sake of any desired end, but rather purely for the sake of the action itself; in other words, Arjuna must fight the Kauravas not because he wishes to see them dead, win the kingdom, or make his family proud, but rather merely because the very act of fighting is his moral duty (to himself, to the gods, and to other beings) as a warrior. Thus the "authority" behind any decision cannot lie in its outcome, but only "in action alone."

A few pages before this passage, Krishna turns from arguing

that Arjuna should not act because the eternal self does not die—which is an argument in terms of samkhya, or knowledge—to explaining why Arjuna should act in terms of yoga (specifically, karma yoga or the yoga of action). By undertaking the disciplined path of yoga and making a commitment to learn to act without clinging to worldly things, desires, and goals, one can achieve "equanimity" by disengaging from the emotions that usually drive unwise people to act. Deciding based on duty alone leads people to discount the passions that cloud their judgment and find peace in a mindset unadulterated by emotion.

Discourse 4 Quotes

॥ Brahman is offering;
Brahman is oblation
poured out by Brahman
in the fire of Brahman;
Brahman is attained
by one absorbed
in the action
of Brahman.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

This passage near the end of the fourth discourse, which abruptly follows a discussion of sacrificial and detached action, may seem deeply confusing at first to readers who are not already familiar with the concept of Brahman in Hinduism. Brahman generally refers to absolute reality, often understood as the transcendent unity of all beings in existence or the infinite, universal, unchanging principle of being. In this sense, it is closely related to both Krishna's true self (also called Vishnu, God, or the Supreme Being) and the universal soul (atman). Krishna is all-pervasive and eternal like Brahman, which he claims as his "womb," and the individual soul is a dimension or piece of Brahman.

In this passage, Krishna demonstrates the unity of all things in Brahman by suggesting that, in a religious offering, Brahman is at once the sacrificer, that which is sacrificed, the tools of sacrifice, the action of sacrifice, and the result of sacrifice. Krishna explains what it means to see all things as dimensions of the transcendent universal being, as he later argues that a wise person must.

Arjuna,
just as the lit fire
makes the kindling
into ashes,
in this same way
the fire of wisdom
makes all actions
into ashes.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

As Krishna discusses the forms and purposes of sacrifice in the fourth discourse, he suggests that some sacrifice their senses to the “fires / of restraint” whereas others indulge the “fires / of the senses.” The former can perform various sacrifices for the sake of the gods, including the sacrifices of knowledge and action. Krishna’s explanation culminates in the above image, which suggests action is the kindling of wise sacrifice: just as fire consumes kindling in the process of producing heat, wisdom consumes actions in the process of sacrifice. The actions are merely a vehicle for demonstrating one’s dutiful adherence to dharma. Indeed, action is only wise if it is performed as a sacrifice to the gods—one sacrifices one’s worldly goals, attachments, and sensations by acting without regard for them.

Discourse 5 Quotes

This master creates neither agent nor action in this world, nor the linking of action with its fruit. But his own nature keeps on evolving.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 64-5

Explanation and Analysis

As he elaborates on the true nature of the immaterial self, Krishna emphasizes that this true self takes no part in action (as he later puts it, the self is merely an “observer” of

the body). The body, not the soul, is the agent of action and connects that action to its own material desires (which stem from the gunas and particularly rajas, or passion). However, the soul is bound to the body and people ignorantly identify with that body, forgetting their true nature and mistakenly imagining that the soul acts in the world. Krishna’s explanation aims to eliminate this confusion by sharply distinguishing the soul that observes from the material body that acts (and should curb its own attachment to action in order to let the soul reincarnate into a purer body in the future). Confusingly, the nature that “keeps on evolving” here does not refer to the true nature of the self, but rather of the material nature of the body—its composition in gunas. This nature continues to evolve because of the gunas’ varied and inconsistent attachment to objects

Discourse 6 Quotes

The self is in all beings and all beings are in the self.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Krishna declares that the eternal higher self (atman) is one with the universal self of all beings (Brahman). He does not literally mean that one’s soul includes everything else that exists, but rather that this soul is a mere dimension of the universal self that includes everything else as well. Notably, the divine form Krishna manifests in the eleventh discourse appears to contain all beings, which suggests that the self and all beings are one and the same because they are both in Krishna. The relationship between Krishna and Brahman is difficult to tease out precisely—at times, as in this passage, it appears that Krishna is Brahman, but he also declares Brahman his “womb,” created by him to make other beings possible.

Discourse 7 Quotes

Understand that all beings have their origins in this nature: I am the birth and the dissolution of the whole world.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Krishna declares himself the origin of the world—he claims to create all beings (including himself) out of his timeless, eternal nature—as well as its dissolution, because all beings ultimately end up joining with Krishna after they ultimately transcend the cycle of reincarnation (*samsara*) and merge into the universal being.

In many forms of Hinduism, the creator (Brahma), the destroyer (Shiva), and the preserver (Vishnu) are considered a trinity—some forms of Hinduism worship one of these gods as encompassing all three functions, and others see them all as dimensions of the same greater being. Although the *Gita* was composed before any of these particular forms consolidated their various doctrines, this passage demonstrates that the text clearly takes Krishna as encompassing all three.

Discourse 8 Quotes

Brahman is the highest imperishable; the highest self is said to be one's own nature, giving rise to all states of being; action is understood as 'sending forth'.

Among the embodied, the highest being is finite existence; the highest god is the great spirit; I am the highest sacrifice here in this body, Chosen One.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Krishna is responding to a series of questions Arjuna poses at the beginning of the eighth discourse—Arjuna wants to know what the highest self, Brahman, and action are; why they are they highest; and what constitutes the highest sacrifice in the body. Again, Krishna emphasizes that the self and Brahman are identical—his definition of Brahman as “the highest imperishable” may seem unhelpful, and he has already established that “one’s own nature” is precisely Brahman and that all being originates from Brahman. In other translations, Krishna simply reaffirms the unity of Brahman and the self in these lines. His declaration just thereafter that “finite existence” is the highest of embodied beings reaffirms this, for finite existence is a bounded dimension of Brahman’s infinite existence.

Krishna’s explanation of action as “sending forth” refers to the creative energy or impulse behind the development of embodied things: action on earth comprises the workings of the gunas, which in turn emerge from Krishna’s continuous acts of creation. Yet, while the eternal self is a dimension of Brahman, Krishna emphasizes that it is not the agent of worldly actions. Therefore, whereas Krishna appears identical to Brahman elsewhere in the text, this passage offers evidence that he is in fact a higher stratum of being, that which brings the unchanging Brahman into changing material circumstances through creative energy.

When Krishna says that he is the “highest sacrifice,” he means that his embodied form as Arjuna’s charioteer is literally God’s reciprocal sacrifice to humanity but also seems to suggest that his general creative acts are sacrificial, too.

Discourse 9 Quotes

॥१॥ This whole world
is woven through
with me,
in a shape
which is formless;
all beings dwell in me,
while I do not
dwell in them.

Yet neither do beings
dwell in me.
Behold, my powerful yoga:
bearing beings,
and yet not dwelling
in beings,
my own self
causing them to be.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

Krishna continues to explain through metaphor how he manages to pervade everything at the same time—just after this quote, he compares this quality to the way everything in the sky dwells in the wind, although nobody would say that the wind dwells in any of these things. There is a difference in kind between Krishna and the material things that dwell in him—he is, as it were, the substance in which they live (although not the material substance, nor merely their existence, but the very quality of their having been created at all).

Yet, as he frequently does throughout the text, Krishna appears to contradict himself in this passage: he states that “all beings dwell in me,” but then that “neither do beings / dwell in me.” There are at least two ways to understand this paradox. The first is as an expression of Krishna’s extraordinary power and humans’ comparative fallibility. The contradiction is actually possible (just as Krishna exceeds all dualities, like that between being and non-being), but people cannot fathom it. The second is that he speaks from two different perspectives that reflect two different levels of understanding: all the apparent material things in the world are truly dimensions of the immaterial form dwells in Krishna, but the material things themselves are not dimensions of Krishna because their materiality is

not their true form (but merely a false appearance).

॥२॥ I am the father of the world –
its mother, its arranger
and its grandfather;
I am what is to be known;
the purifier;
the sound ‘Om’;
the *Rig*, the *Sama*
and the *Yajur Veda*.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

As Krishna begins the long list of his forms that he picks up at length in the tenth discourse, he begins by reminding Arjuna that he is the unitary creator and “arranger” of everything in the universe. He is “what is to be known” because the purpose of wisdom is to understand and unite with him, which purifies the self.

Crucially, Krishna also relates himself to important Hindu beliefs that preexist the *Gita*. First, he identifies with the universal sound “Om,” which is supposedly the sum of all other sounds in the universe; “Om” is the sonic representation of Krishna’s absolute creative power, although (like all the other sensible forms he takes) this is merely a proxy to his true self. Secondly, he identifies with the three Vedas, the ancient scriptural texts that instruct Hindus on worship and philosophy. Yet, as with the sound “Om,” the Vedas are holy proxies for the divine, for they are often believed to contain all knowledge; however, they are not actually the divine, but merely an expression of it. Throughout the *Gita*, Krishna manages to both reinforce the Vedas’ central role in Hindu doctrine and show that, although they might contain all wisdom, they are not themselves gods to be worshipped but rather mere means to a true, personal relationship with the divine.

¶¶ Those who choose gods go to the gods.
 Those who choose ancestors go to the ancestors.
 Those who honour the ghosts go to the ghosts.
 Those who sacrifice to me go to me.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 107-8

Explanation and Analysis

Krishna makes this declaration just after explaining that all sacrifices are ultimately for his own sake, because he is the totality of all things. Notably, he continues to distinguish himself from the lesser gods—their power is partial and they remain mere components of his absolute divinity. He therefore suggests that even people who dutifully sacrifice to the lesser gods are not sacrificing wisely, for they do not recognize that the lesser gods' power is merely a dimension of Krishna's ultimate power. By sacrificing to the gods, ancestors, or ghosts, one makes an incomplete and ignorant sacrifice to Krishna. Worshipping Krishna for his own sake encompasses the worship of all other gods and divine beings, but only this worship is wise because it grasps the totality of the universe.

In this passage, Krishna also reminds Arjuna about the reciprocal relationship he sustains with devotees—people are rewarded in kind for the sacrifices they practice. This is why Krishna repeatedly emphasizes his love for Arjuna, whose devotion to the supreme lord has no equal.

Discourse 10 Quotes

¶¶ Among rulers with the sceptre,
 I am authority.
 Among those who want victory,
 I am wise conduct.
 Among hidden things,
 I am silence.
 Among the wise,
 I am wisdom.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

These four forms stand curiously among the dozens of divine forms Krishna lists: all the forms before this point are exemplars of a category (like Arjuna, the greatest of the Pandavas, among them all, and Vyasa, the greatest poet, among them all). Yet here, he is not the best ruler or the most valiant warrior, the most hidden of things or the wisest of all; rather, he stands for the very qualities that hold these categories together. A ruler is defined by their authority and the wise by their wisdom—Krishna has moved from merely declaring that he is the greatest of beings to showing that he is in fact the substrate that lies beneath beings in the first place, as their condition of possibility. His examples demonstrate how he might dwell in all things despite having neither existence nor non-existence: for instance, all wise people are wise (wisdom is “in” them) but wisdom is not an identifiable object in the world, just as Krishna is in everything as a quality but not a being.

¶¶ Understand
 that whatever
 powerful being there is—
 be it splendid,
 or filled with vigour,
 it comes to be
 from only a small part
 of my brilliance.

But what, Arjuna,
 is the purpose
 of this abundant wisdom
 to you?
 I stand, holding up
 this entire world
 with only a small part
 of my self.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

After enumerating a few of his forms, Krishna emphasizes that he far exceeds the brilliant list he has offered: in fact, because he is infinite and formless, particular forms can evoke or point to his truth but none can ever fully capture it,

no matter how powerful. Similarly, he only requires a fragment of himself to sustain the entire world, for its enormity pales in comparison to his absolute power.

The most crucial and mysterious part of this passage is Krishna's question to Arjuna: "what, Arjuna / is the purpose / of this abundant wisdom / to you?" For one, Krishna is pointing out that listing his forms, as he has done here, is really a useless exercise: thinking about these limited forms does not mean understanding his true self, and in fact can serve as a distraction unless one realizes that they are proxies for the true supreme being. However, Krishna is also challenging Arjuna to make something of his newfound knowledge, to translate an acquaintance with Krishna's various forms into an understanding of his all-encompassing truth and then translate this understanding into devotion.

"Hari" is another name for the supreme being that Krishna embodies (as a side note, the Hare Krishna movement takes its name from these two labels for the same God). And "Pritha" is another name for Kunti, Arjuna's mother.

॥ I see you everywhere:
arms, bellies, faces, eyes—
form without end.

I see you,
Lord of the Universe,
Manifold One,
you have no beginning,
no middle, no end.

Discourse 11 Quotes

॥ Your Majesty,
when he said this,
Hari, the great lord
of yoga,
showed to Arjuna
the Son of Pritha
his highest,
most powerful, form.

Related Characters: Sanjaya (speaker), Arjuna, Krishna, Dhritarashtra

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

The flow of Krishna's dialogue with Arjuna is briefly interrupted when, in order to demonstrate what happened when Krishna adopted his divine form, the minister Sanjaya speaks a few verses (although, technically, he has been reporting the entire conversation to Dhritarashtra). Even though Arjuna can only see Krishna when the god gives him "the divine eye," Sanjaya can also see Krishna's divine form because the sage Vyasa (who also composed the *Mahabharata*, which contains the *Gita*) gifted him with the ability to see everything that occurs between the Kauravas and Pandavas on the battlefield. In a sense, Sanjaya is built into the text as the first Hindu to begin learning from Arjuna's dialogue with Krishna; he exemplifies how other students of the *Gita* should take up its teachings.

Related Characters: Arjuna (speaker), Krishna

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

Although Arjuna had previously begun to understand Krishna's all-pervading nature from an intellectual standpoint, now he grasps it through the senses. This is both empowering and dangerous: while the spectacle of Krishna's divine form offers Arjuna a more salient and intense representation of Krishna's absolute power, it also acts on the senses, which Krishna emphasizes are untrustworthy tools of the body that remain incapable of grasping the real truth of existence. Arjuna can truly understand Krishna's infinity for the first time, but he also risks mistaking Krishna for the incredible being he sees before him. Indeed, he sees Krishna as "form without end," which pushes the distinction between visible form and invisible formlessness to its limit: although Krishna is truly formless, underlying the material world rather than participating in it, here he appears as the sum of all things, the integration of all form, and therefore still a material being. Again, the divine form expresses Krishna's power but is not Krishna himself.

¶ The form of mine
which you have seen
is hard to discern.
Even the gods
are eternally
wanting to have
the sacred sight
of this form.

Neither through Veda,
nor heated discipline,
nor gift,
nor sacrifice,
is it possible
to see me
in the way
you have seen me.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 137-8

Explanation and Analysis

After returning to his human form, Krishna reminds Arjuna that he is privileged to have seen the divine form: even those who undertake all the proper forms of devotion that Krishna outlines in the final discourse (adherence to the Vedas, heated discipline, gift and sacrifice) do not have access to this form. The fact that even the gods are still waiting to see Krishna's divine form suggests that they, along with all others who wait for it, may not have the wisdom to understand that Krishna truly exceeds all form. However, one difficulty of gaining this wisdom through the intellect alone is that doing so makes it harder for people to form a personal relationship of devotion to Krishna, for he is part of each person (the immaterial part that inhabits a body) and sustains reciprocal devotion to those who worship him. Yet, if Krishna's love for devotees who worship properly is not enough to warrant his showing them the divine form, then it is unclear why Arjuna gets to see it; it cannot simply stem from Krishna's love for him. More likely, Krishna sees his display as a means to return dharma to humankind, for (although it does not contain the whole truth) the divine form is a powerful metaphor for Krishna's all-pervasive nature and wisdom.

Discourse 14 Quotes

¶ Blameless One,
there *sattva* is
stainless
and brings light;
it binds by connection
to joy,
and by connection
to wisdom.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

In the fourteenth discourse, Krishna begins to explain the three gunas, which are material elements that bind the soul to the body, yet he suggests that *sattva* is a force of purity that brings one toward enlightenment. Although *sattva* is a material force, then, it is not vulgar or unwise like the other gunas; it is the force in the body that leads the self away from it, the lucid tendency to turn away from the other gunas and toward the divine. This paradoxical feature of *sattva* makes it something like a stepping stone to enlightenment: the body acts to bring itself toward *sattva* so that the soul can escape it altogether. As a will to purity, it is itself impure because it is material; as a force that inheres in the body, it actually seeks to dissolve the body.

Discourse 15 Quotes

¶ The form of the *ashvattha*
is not to be discerned here,
neither its end,
nor beginning,
nor ongoing life.
When its fully grown roots
are cut by the strong axe
of non-clinging,

then that place must be sought
where, once they have gone,
they will not turn back again,
and they think,
'I take refuge
in the first spirit
where activity flowed forth
in ancient times.'

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna**Related Themes:**  **Related Symbols:** **Page Number:** 163-4**Explanation and Analysis**

Krishna opens the fifteenth discourse with the Vedic image of the ashvattha tree (more commonly known as a banyan tree). The tree's beginning, "ongoing life," and end are indiscernible because it grows unpredictably in all directions; its roots do not need to extend into the ground and often meld with its branches, like the multifaceted Brahman that lacks discernible form. Yet the tree he uses for the metaphor is initially rooted, just as Brahman becomes rooted in the world when a portion or dimension of it (the indestructible individual self) attaches itself to the body and its gunas. Freeing the tree from its roots requires non-clinging because only a detachment from the fruits of action can lead people to find eternal "refuge" in joining themselves with Brahman.

Discourse 17 Quotes Om tat sat.**Related Characters:** Krishna (speaker), Arjuna**Related Themes:**  **Page Number:** 182**Explanation and Analysis**

Krishna argues that worshippers can pursue the path of devotion by repeating "Om tat sat," which he calls the "threefold designation" of Brahman. This translates literally to "Om that real," or "Om is the truth." "Om" is the universal cosmic sound, which ostensibly captures all other sounds within it; by declaring "Om" the truth, one remains fixated on the fact of all things' unity in Brahman and source in Krishna.

Krishna previously explained that one goes to whatever one is thinking about at the time of death, so dying while thinking of Om's truth (and therefore Krishna) will presumably lead one to enlightenment. Likewise, Krishna explains that "Om tat sat" purifies worship by ensuring that the worshipper is focused on the act itself as a form of sacrifice to the divine, rather than thinking of worldly ends (as in rajasic worship) or practicing carelessly (as in tamasic

worship). Also notice that "sat" ("reality" or "truth") is the root of the word for the guna of purity, sattva, which suggests that sattva is the material force of the true (higher) reality. "Om tat sat" remains a popular mantra that Hindus often utter during worship and meditation.

Discourse 18 Quotes

 The poets know that the leaving aside of action based on desire is renunciation; and the clear-sighted see that the giving up of all fruit of such action is called letting go.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna**Related Themes:**  **Page Number:** 184**Explanation and Analysis**

At the beginning of the final discourse, Krishna summarizes the difference between giving up all action and merely giving up the fruit of action. In part, this distinction aims to demonstrate that the numerous ancient Hindus who spent their lives in ascetic meditation away from society were acting selfishly, out of a desire for the dissolution of the self that is just as unhealthy as the material desires that many others pursue in action. One must not act for the sake of enlightenment but rather for the sake of sacrifice, in order to prove one's devotional relationship to God and maintain the order of the universe in fulfilling one's dharma. Inaction—like Arjuna's inaction in the battle for Hastinapura—often stems from desire as much as most action does. Therefore, although meditation and a refusal of material desire are essential parts of yogic practice, yoga is ultimately about overcoming all desire by learning to act dutifully and sacrificially, rather than rejecting some desires but secretly retaining a desire for enlightenment. Giving up desire is essential; giving up action is a false solution, which is why Arjuna must fight.

So this wisdom
told to you by me
is more hidden
than the hidden;
and when you have
pondered this
completely,
then do as you like.

Even further,
listen to
my highest word:
the most hidden of all;
you are greatly
loved by me,
so I will speak
for your benefit.

Devoted to me,
keep your mind intent on me,
give honour to me,
and sacrifice to me.
In this way, you will
truly go to me,
I promise,
for you are my beloved.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

In his last speech of the *Gita*, Krishna implores Arjuna to continue worshipping him and learn to act on the knowledge he has gained. Clearly, enlightenment does not come in a single moment of divine inspiration, as in many Western traditions, but rather requires continuous, lifelong practice, for it is only realized after the death of the body. Although Krishna creates and governs all beings, it is up to individuals to choose how to act, which is why the supreme god tells Arjuna to “do as you like.”

Yet Krishna then introduces his “highest word,” the most important advice of all: his devotion is mutual, and devotion

to him is all that one needs to ensure that one comes to transcend the body. Many interpreters see this line as proving the primacy of the path of devotion over all other forms of worship and wisdom; although, in the first half of the *Gita*, Krishna clearly argued that knowledge and action can also bring enlightenment, it seems that Arjuna has achieved devotion but has yet to undertake the other paths (although he now has the resources to do so). This devotion probably accounts for Arjuna’s coming victory in the war, although Krishna’s words do not necessarily proclaim devotion the highest path for all people.

One who learns
and recites
this conversation of ours
so filled with *dharma*
would sacrifice to me
with the sacrifice of knowledge.

Related Characters: Krishna (speaker), Arjuna

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

In one of his final verses, Krishna implores Arjuna to pass the knowledge he has learned to other Hindus, but he is also clearly speaking directly to the reader. The *Gita* seems to be declaring its own importance, establishing that its study constitutes a meaningful devotional practice. One might interpret this instruction from a philological perspective, imagining that it was added during recitation to justify the performer’s efforts, declare their progress toward wisdom, and implore others to follow in their footsteps to preserve the *Gita* and chart their own path of devotion. Alternatively, one might see this as an original instruction directly from Krishna, which would have originally led people to begin reciting the *Gita*. Notably, the *Gita* is already an oral text on three different levels: it is a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, Sanjaya reports this dialogue, and the whole text is traditionally recited as a religious performance.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

DISCOURSE 1

Dhritarashtra, the blind king of Hastinapura, asks his minister, Sanjaya, what happened when his sons (the Kauravas) met their cousins (the Pandavas) “in the field of dharma” to battle for the kingdom that both sides claim. Sanjaya recounts Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava son, approaching his martial arts teacher, Drona, and remarking on the Pandavas’ extensive forces, listing the warriors and charioteers he and his brothers were poised to fight. However, noble and powerful warriors also led the Kauravas’ skilled army, which was ready to die for Duryodhana’s sake and followed the command of Bhishma, who was great-uncle to both sides of the Bharata family. The Kauravas’ forces seemed “unbounded” compared to the Pandava army, which was led by a powerful warrior named Bhima. Duryodhana charged all of his side’s warriors with protecting Bhishma and holding their proper places.

Sanjaya continues: to Duryodhana’s pleasure, Bhishma blows his conch horn, leading his army’s instruments to create an uproar until, from their chariot, Krishna and Arjuna blow their own conch horns, followed by Bhima, the other Pandava brothers, and their ally, Drupada. All of the Pandavas’ horns are divine and specifically named, and their cry “tore the hearts” of the Kauravas, causing the earth and sky to shake.

As he raises his bow, Arjuna asks Krishna to bring their chariot between the armies. Arjuna gazes out on the Kauravas, asks whom he must fight first, and notes his enemies’ devotion to their cause. Krishna brings the chariot to the middle of the battlefield, and Arjuna sees his family on all sides. The Pandava warrior breaks down, telling Krishna that his body seems to fail him, and he cannot think clearly, as he sees no reason to kill his kinsmen. He finds that victory, kingship, and pleasure have become meaningless, for he wants all three only on behalf of the family he must now kill.

Vyasa, the grandfather of both sides and the legendary composer of the Mahabharata, blessed Sanjaya with the power to see everything that transpired on the battlefield or “field of dharma,” a phrase that immediately establishes dharma as a central motif in the text. At this point in the Mahabharata, the Pandavas have already defeated the Kauravas, but the reader only learns about the war’s events through the frame story of Sanjaya recounting the tale to the blind Dhritarashtra, who rejected the gift of sight because he did not want to watch the other side of his family (the Pandavas) get slaughtered. The king’s despair over the conflict within his family evokes the tension between familial and political obligations that later shatters Arjuna’s moral compass, but that Bishma seems to have overcome by picking a side.



Although the Kauravas initiate the battle cries, the odds are clearly in the Pandavas’ favor: their horns are divine (unlike the Kauravas’) and their performance is much more tumultuous, shaking the earth as if the gods are crying out. The remainder of the Gita shows how the Pandavas won the gods’ favor: Arjuna learned to devote himself to the divine and follow his dharma.



From the center of the battlefield, Arjuna loses sight of the distinction between the Kauravas and Pandavas, seeing them again as members of the same family. He also loses control of his body and sense of motivation, which curiously foreshadows Krishna’s later suggestion that, by standing between and looking beyond earthly dualities, one can relinquish attachment to the outcomes of action, and the soul can learn to transcend the body. While Arjuna realizes that he cannot bring himself to fight merely for the sake of victory, kingship, and pleasure—in other words, he is not wedded to the outcomes of action—he does not yet understand the true justification for action.



Arjuna declares that he cannot slay his cousins and would take no joy in this evil battle, which would destroy his family and its dharma forever, defiling their women, corrupting the caste system, and leading their ancestors to fall into hell. Lamenting the family's eagerness to kill their own for pleasure and power, Arjuna declares he would find "greater peace" were he to simply suffer the Kauravas' attack unarmed. He drops his bow and arrow, "recoiling in grief."

DISCOURSE 2

As Arjuna weeps on the battlefield, Krishna calls him ignoble, disgraceful, and cowardly; Arjuna wonders how he can bring himself to kill his family members, saying that he would rather eat a beggar's food than fight them. It would be just as good for the Kauravas to win, Arjuna says, for he would not want to continue living even if the Pandavas won. Yet he admits that his feeling of pity, sense of moral wrongness, and anticipation of endless grief cloud his knowledge of dharma, so he asks Krishna for guidance.

Sanjaya explains that, as Arjuna refused to fight, Krishna grew quiet before apparently starting to laugh and then telling Arjuna that, although his words seem wise, his mourning is unwise: the dead and living continue to exist forever, as they are reincarnated in other bodies, so they should not be mourned. Sensations like pain and pleasure are ephemeral and should be endured. Only people who see pain and pleasure as equivalent are truly "ready / for immortality." Such souls, who see the truth, can readily see the limit of being and non-being. The "imperishable" world cannot be destroyed, and this includes bodies that will be reincarnated as part of the "eternal / embodied self."

Accordingly, Krishna tells Arjuna to fight; the self does not kill or get killed because it is eternal. This eternal self sheds bodies like a human sheds old clothes; weapons do not destroy this self, which is difficult to perceive with vision or the intellect because it is "formless / and unchanging." If Arjuna accepts that the self is eternal, Krishna explains that he "should not / mourn it" because everything that is born is certain to die. Beings move from formless beginnings to "middle states" in which they are formed, and back into formlessness. Krishna laments that, while it is "a wonder" that anyone discovers this at all, most still do not come to know it. He insists that, because the true self cannot be harmed, Arjuna "should not grieve / for any living beings."

Arjuna couches his opposition to the war in terms of his family's dharma, which suggests that he already recognizes dharma's relationship to action in a limited way. Although Arjuna sees the dharma of family as superseding the dharma of caste, Krishna eventually challenges the warrior's initial perspective.



Arjuna and Krishna's disagreement centers on a tension between family and social obligations—Arjuna would gladly lose his social (caste) status as a warrior by eating a beggar's food. However, he now recognizes that this may not reflect his true dharma because it comes from emotion rather than rational reflection.



Krishna introduces the model of reincarnation and transcendence that soon becomes the cornerstone of the Gita's theology: because the true self is immaterial and eternal, mourning is unnecessary. In fact, all concern with emotion seems to reveal a limited perspective, in which one forgets the true nature of being in favor of unwise attachments to the false, material world and the dualities that govern humans' limited experience.



Krishna acknowledges that wisdom is difficult to achieve because the true self is formless and therefore not readily perceptible to humans. Although he clearly thinks that fully understanding this truth would liberate people from their ignorance and emotional attachments, he does not seem to expect this from people and soon offers other routes to the same end, such as yoga.



The kshatriya warrior's dharma, Krishna continues, lies precisely in battle, so Arjuna will harm his dharma by refusing to fight. People will speak of his "eternal disgrace"—which is worse than death—and fellow warriors will think that he was fearful and unworthy. Those hostile to him will ridicule him, and there is no greater pain. Krishna explains that Arjuna will reach heaven if he dies and rule the earth if he survives, and so he will cause no harm if he learns to equivocate pain and pleasure, as well as victory and defeat.

Krishna explains that he has told Arjuna his insights in terms of samkhya and will now explain them in terms of yoga (the practice of deliberate, intense devotional engagement that often involves meditation). This yoga wastes neither momentum nor effort. While this insight is singular and unwavering, others' insights are "endless, / with many branches." Some naively declare that nothing exists beside the world of the Vedas; these people desire heaven and perform rituals for "power / and consumption," but do not realize that they must undergo reincarnation first.

Krishna explains that Arjuna must free himself from the three gunas, to which the Vedas belong, as well as becoming "free from opposites" and fully "self-possessed." A discerning brahmin (priest or teacher) sees as much in the Vedas as water in an overflowing well. One's "authority" lies only in action, and one should never be motivated by the benefits they stand to gain by acting, nor cling to inaction. Krishna tells Arjuna to act, without regard to success or frustration, for "yoga is equanimity."

Action, Krishna continues, "is far inferior / to the yoga of insight." People motivated by the fruits of action should be pitied, for the insightful are indifferent to good and evil acts, able to adopt yoga's "ease in action" and cease feeling pain. Once his insight supersedes his confusion and he learns to ignore the previous revelations he has heard, Arjuna can achieve yoga.

Arjuna asks Krishna what language a wise meditator with unwavering thoughts could have—how could they "speak? Or sit? Or move about?" Krishna explains that one who has renounced desire becomes content with the self, free from anxiety and greed, "rage, passion, and fear," a sage without desire and even without a draw to the pure or impure, good or evil, like a tortoise who "pulls in its limbs." The sage stops attending to their senses, and by fasting, even conquers taste. The senses violently distract the mind from its focus, but one who has practiced yoga and learns to control their senses remains firm in their wisdom.

Krishna confirms that Arjuna's dharma should be based on his social identity as a warrior rather than his familial one as a Bharata. Eternal disgrace is worse than death because it follows the soul to future lives, whereas the soul would ultimately be rewarded for a valiant death. Just as the soul carries dharma in the body's absence, one's failures determine one's reputation even after death.



Krishna has first directly explained the eternal truths he wishes to teach Arjuna. Now, he explains how to translate this knowledge into true wisdom (and hopefully avoid becoming one of the numerous people who have heard but never internalized the truth). Noticeably, desiring heaven is still a form of unhealthy attachment for Krishna, so those who do so will certainly fail to achieve heaven upon death.



Krishna begins trying to erode the authority of earlier Hindu scriptures (the Vedas), suggesting that they cannot serve as a formula for getting into heaven but rather must fit into a broader scheme of knowledge that depends on the knower's wisdom.



Curiously, as he tries to persuade Arjuna to take up arms, Krishna nevertheless declares insight superior to action. In part, he seems to think this because insightful people act wisely. He explains this position more systematically in the following discourse, but he is clearly trying to tell Arjuna that merely fighting is not enough; rather, he must fight with the proper mindset and insight.



Arjuna recognizes the apparent contradiction in Krishna's argument: pure, unshakeable wisdom might be impossible for most people to achieve because it seems at odds with all action whatsoever. Krishna does not answer this query yet, for he needs to emphasize that insight truly is antithetical to the material world. Although he later shows that a wise person can indeed speak, sit, or move about, he wants to emphasize that insight is sufficient in itself to bring enlightenment. Krishna says that taste goes last because it was traditionally considered the deepest sense.



By dwelling on the senses, Krishna explains, one begins clinging to worldly things, which leads to desire, and consequently to anger, confusion, the loss of memory, the loss of insight, and finally the loss of the self. One who does not give into the senses learns to control the self and “attains peace,” losing the ability to feel pain and gaining a steady insight. But yoga and the concentration it teaches are the only means to this peace, and one cannot have pleasure without peace. When following the senses, the mind loses wisdom “like the wind / steals a ship / on the water.” In contrast, the wisdom of a person who restrains the senses “stands firm.”

The sage learns to watch all beings during the night. The sage gains peace like that of the ocean as it fills with water, unlike for “one who desires desire.” The sage loses the idea of possession and even the self as “I,” reaching peace as the state of Brahman and feeling “the bliss of cessation.”

DISCOURSE 3

Arjuna asks how Krishna can consider insight higher than action yet still encourage him to fight, which seems contradictory. Arjuna wonders how he might achieve “the higher good.”

Krishna explains that he has always taught a “double foundation”: the yoga of knowledge and the yoga of action. One cannot surpass action without acting, nor can one find fulfillment through renunciation alone; everyone is constantly acting because the gunas in their nature compel them to. Some choose to sit and relinquish the senses, all the while imagining the sensory experience of objects that are not present. This is misleading, for only one who restrains the senses while undertaking “the yoga of action” can truly temper the senses. Restrained action is preferable to non-action, for the body could not even survive without action.

Action for the sake of sacrifice is the only pure form. Since “the lord of beings” created humans and sacrifice, sacrifice allows humans to “cause the gods to be” as the gods “cause you to be.” In mutually sustaining the relationship between gods and humans, the lord of beings explained, sacrifice brings people to “the higher good.” The gods give humans pleasures, but people who do not give back to the gods are thieves—“the true ones” can eat what they are left with after sacrifice, but “the evil ones” only cook for themselves. Food comes from the rain, but sacrifice creates the rain, and sacrifice is a form of action that originates with Brahman.

The opposite of yoga, oversaturation in the world leads people to lose track of their true, eternal selves and instead cling to the desires of their false, worldly bodies. For Krishna, the fulfillment of earthly desire does not count as true pleasure because it is temporary and unsustainable—one immediately begins to covet and seek out something else, rather than finding the sustainable pleasure of peace and wisdom.



This deeply metaphorical ending compares the sage’s loss of self in face of Brahman’s universal being to water entering the ocean. Both continue to exist yet find fulfillment by losing their individuality to join a greater whole.



In the previous discourse, Krishna suggested that wisdom is the route to bliss, which does not seem to explain why Arjuna should go to war. Again, Arjuna returns to the apparent contradiction between insight and action.



Krishna suggests that, despite his argument in the previous discourse that wisdom is sufficient for knowledge, action is necessary as a means to achieving full insight (indeed, yoga is itself a form of action). The paths of knowledge and action are mutually supportive, not mutually exclusive—one must actively undertake the path of knowledge through yoga, and pure action requires the knowledge of reincarnation and the absolute.



For the wise, every action is a form of sacrifice because one does not consider their personal gain or material desires in acting, but rather performs their duty for its own sake. Crucially, pure sacrifice does in fact benefit the actor, who receives a reciprocal love and sacrifice from the gods, but this only works if the actor puts the gods first. This is why they would offer food before eating what remains.



One who does not “set the wheel / in motion” by sacrifice “lives uselessly,” harming others and embroiled in the senses, but one who is “happy in the self” has no goal in action or non-action connected to other beings. By dutifully performing the proper sacrificial actions, without clinging to the fruits of those actions, one can gain fulfillment and set a standard for others. If he himself decided not to act, Krishna suggests, humankind would follow him, the worlds “would sink down,” and humans would be destroyed.

According to Krishna, The wise act because they want to “keep the world / collected together” rather than because they cling to action’s fruits. Wisdom leads people to delight in all actions, which follow from the gunas of nature and not the Self that appears to be “the doer.” By recognizing that the gunas are merely acting upon themselves, one can stop clinging and achieve freedom from desire and the self through restrained action. However, many people lose their wisdom to desire. Even the wise act in accord with their own nature, so restraint is worthless; emotions lie between the senses and the world, so people should not succumb to their power. Ultimately, it is better to follow one’s own dharma, even unsuccessfully, than the dharma of another.

Arjuna asks why people can be compelled to do harm, and Krishna blames rajas, the guna of passion. Rajas conceals wisdom like smoke conceals fire or dust conceals a mirror. Like an always-hungry fire, desire hides the true nature of “insight, mind / and the senses,” confusing the self. Krishna tells Arjuna to control his senses and defeat evil desire. He explains that the senses are crucial, but the mind is more so, insight even more, and the self most of all. By learning about the self, Krishna declares, Arjuna can defeat the evasive enemy of desire.

DISCOURSE 4

Krishna says that he explained yoga to the sun-god, who then told the first human, Manu, who told his son and passed it down to royal sages until humans lost their knowledge of it. However, Arjuna gets to learn the ancient yoga because he is Krishna’s devotee and friend.

The “wheel” refers to the process of gradual self-improvement through the cycle of reincarnation (*samsara*). The fact that a wise person also has no goals in non-action demonstrates that renunciation does not work if the renoucer is deliberately trying to get the “wheel” turning. By suggesting that the world would “sink” if he did not act, Krishna begins to hint at his immense power and shows the necessity of his reciprocal action on humanity’s behalf. However, since he is wise, it seems that he has no attachment to the world and therefore only sustains humanity because of people’s devotion to him—in this sense, he sets a standard for others.



Wise action is not only a sacrifice on behalf of the gods, but on behalf of the entire world, which would not exist without sacrifice. Wise people can find pleasure in even difficult or painful actions because they realize that these are undertaken out of necessity—both the necessity of the gunas’ physical action and the necessity of fulfilling one’s dharma by letting the gunas flow—and so do not reflect on the eternal self. Indeed, allowing the gunas to take their course reflects an indifference to material things and preparedness for eternity.



Arjuna’s thinking has begun to change, as he now recognizes that actions are compelled and not chosen. Clinging to action demonstrates one’s domination by rajas, which also means that people adhere to the world precisely because of the gunas that exist in it. Just as desire takes itself as an object, the world’s imperfections lead people to cling to it.



Krishna again suggests that his powers are far greater than what meets the eye. He also reveals his motivations for intervening in human affairs: he wants to give people the wisdom they have forgotten, which the Bhagavad Gita preserves and transmits.



Arjuna asks how Krishna told the sun-god, who was purportedly born earlier, but Krishna insists that he has had many births, bringing himself into being through his own “creative force” whenever dharma is lacking. He strives to fix dharma, saving the good and punishing the evil—when souls who are acquainted with the divine graduate from their human lives, they go to Krishna, as they have purified themselves through wisdom and discipline, abandoning vices like greed, fear, and anger. Krishna dedicates his efforts to those who first dedicate themselves to him through sacrifice. He created the castes, meting out the gunas through his act of creation, although he is nevertheless “the Imperishable One / who does not act.” Krishna, and those who know him, are not adulterated by desire or constrained by action.

Yet, by acting with insight, the ancients sought freedom, as Krishna implores Arjuna to do now. While some poets are confused by the difference between action and non-action, Krishna believes people can nevertheless achieve knowledge through “watchful insight” into action and inaction. This leads them to see “non-action in action, / and action in non-action.” These people relinquish all attachment to action’s results, restraining the mind and acting with the body, doing no evil and surpassing dualities. For these sacrificial sages, sacrificial action “dissolves altogether.”

Krishna declares that Brahman offers Brahman to Brahman and thereby attains Brahman. While some sacrifice to specific gods, others sacrifice in this way, to Brahman. In yoga, some people sacrifice their senses to the “fires / of restraint” and others indulge in them, sacrificing to the “fires / of the senses.” Ascetics (people who practice extreme discipline and deny themselves worldly pleasures) can sacrifice in a variety of ways, from knowledge and relinquishing material things to focusing on breath control and fasting. These people who sacrifice can be reunited with Brahman, but this sacrifice is an action.

Yet since knowledge contains all action, the sacrifice of knowledge is better than that of material things; surrendering and questioning can lead one to wisdom, and through such discourse, Arjuna can learn to see “all beings” in himself and in Krishna. Even the most evil people can be cured through wisdom, for “the fire of wisdom / makes all actions / into ashes.” Wisdom purifies and perfects the self, leading it “to the highest peace.” Without it, “the doubting self / is destroyed” and ceases to find pleasure in any world. However, the wise person is not bound by action—like a knife, wisdom severs doubt. Krishna tells Arjuna to “stand up, / and dwell in yoga!”

The loss of ancient wisdom, it seems, has led to a decline in dharma, which the feud between the Pandavas and Kauravas may reflect. Indeed, if even Arjuna, the most heroic of all men, cannot act wisely, then the world truly needs divine intervention. Krishna’s immense power seems to create some paradoxes: he can create himself, and indeed he creates much without acting. Once Arjuna eventually discovers that all being consists in fragments of Krishna’s absolute being, this begins to make sense: Krishna is immaterial, but he births all material things.



Krishna makes it clear that humanity has already fallen into ignorance, relative to the sages who came before. The wise can see that the true self does not act when the material self does (“non-action in action”), but also that inaction is itself a deliberate act of the gunas (“action in non-action”). In this way, their ability to surpass dualities hinges on their understanding of the difference between the higher and lower selves. Again, Krishna reiterates that inaction cannot resolve the pitfalls of action, but only an indifference to all action yet willingness to perform it out of sacrifice.



Krishna introduces the crucial difference between the absolute God and the particular gods many people worship: the former includes people and the eternal self, but the latter is conceived as separate and providential. This explains Krishna’s mysterious declaration about Brahman: as aspects of a unified whole, individuals sacrifice to Krishna (who is that absolute whole) in order to unify themselves with him by transcending the cycle of reincarnation (*samsara*).



Arjuna submitted to Krishna’s wisdom at the beginning of the Bhagavad Gita by admitting his ignorance and asking for guidance; this may explain Krishna’s partiality to Arjuna and serves as a model for the devoted reader. Wisdom turns actions “into ashes” by convincing people to invest less in their outcomes and severs doubt through the promise of unity with Brahman.



DISCOURSE 5

Arjuna notes that Krishna praises both renouncing action and yoga, which seem to be opposites. He asks which is better. Krishna says that, while both “lead to the highest bliss,” yoga is better because its practice creates an “eternal renouncer.” The wise also see that samkhya and yoga are not separate, but rather that yoga includes samkhya, and that renunciation is difficult without yoga.

When acting through yoga, one conquers the senses and attains “the self of all beings,” knowing the truths that “I am not doing anything at all” and “the senses dwell in their objects.” Such a person is incorruptible and purifies the self, achieving peace as they give up the fruit of action and the illusion of control over their actions. They do not imagine themselves as an agent, nor do they see a causal link between themselves and action’s outcomes. Instead, they continue to evolve and take no interest in the good or harm that others do.

Wisdom destroys ignorance about the self and prevents people from being reborn, letting them see that an educated brahmin and an outcaste dog-cooker are one and the same. They overcome reincarnation (*samsara*) by submitting to the unity of Brahman, refusing to budge at the sight of something loved or unloved, giving up on worldly sensations and finding “endless joy” in the self’s unity with Brahman. Sensory pleasures cannot be appreciated because they have beginnings and ends—they are not timeless, but those who endure them in order to release themselves from them through yoga achieve “cessation / in Brahman, / of one being / with Brahman.”

Such cessation leads sages to “rejoice in the friendship / of all beings” and achieve a release from all emotions. The sage reaches peace in knowing Krishna, the “great lord of the whole world” who holds everything in his heart.

Again, Krishna seems to advocate different paths to the same end: renouncing the fruits of action, samkhya (knowledge), and yoga, which includes the other two and is therefore the most reliable strategy even though it is merely a means to these pure orientations.



The enlightened combine dutiful action with a knowledge of action’s separateness from their true selves. Since they are detached from the material world, enlightened people cannot be influenced by others’ deeds. This suggests that Arjuna should not take issue with his cousins’ desire to fight him. However, it is unclear how Krishna squares people’s ability to choose proper, wise action with his insistence that they are not the agents of that action. The solution may be that action and blame are both properties of the lower, earthly self, whereas the higher, eternal self is never structurally affected by the properties of the bodies it inhabits.



Curiously, even though Krishna has argued that Arjuna must fight because his dharma is closely tied to his caste status as a warrior, he nevertheless suggests that wise people do not see people differently because of caste. This reflects the Gita’s ambivalent relationship to caste throughout: Krishna argues that people should fulfill their caste functions on earth and maintains that all beings are foundationally equal as parts of Brahman despite their worldly differences.



Brahman—which is beginning to seem identical with Krishna—figures as the joyous unity of beings, creating another ostensible paradox: one achieves peace and pleasure in eternity only by relinquishing one’s commitment to them on earth.



DISCOURSE 6

Krishna repeats that a person who acts properly without caring about “the fruit of action” practices yoga, which is inextricably tied to renunciation. After achieving yoga through action, one can adopt quietude. This requires first elevating “the self through the self” to make the self a friend. The highest self combines opposites like cold and heat, pride and disgrace, or clay and gold. Such a sage sustains their insight among friends and enemies alike, having joined the self to yoga in meditation and shed sensory concerns. This restraint brings the yoga practitioner closer to Krishna.

Yoga is not about pursuing the extremes of indulgence or asceticism; it destroys all pain by allowing people to abide “in the self alone” without desire, like a flame that stands still without wind. One holds back one’s thoughts and reaches contentment, “seeing the self / by the self, / in the self” and reaching the “place / of endless joy” that exceeds the senses. Once there, one’s commitment to that place is unshakable and dissolves the “bond to pain.” One can become quiet, thinking of nothing but the self and redirecting the mind to control the self whenever it wanders. This peace of mind and calmness lead the practitioner to “endless joy” and Brahman by showing them that “the self is / in all beings / and all beings / are in the self.” Others who recognize this unity and equality of all beings and sensations come to live with and in Krishna.

Arjuna asks how anyone can find a “stable foundation” for yoga since the mind always wanders. Krishna explains that, while this is difficult, practice, restraint, and dedication can make it possible.

Arjuna asks what happens to one who fails to fulfill yoga, for they must be lost, and implores Krishna to eradicate all his doubt, for no one else can do so. Krishna explains that someone who tries but fails to practice yoga is simply reincarnated and allowed to continue trying, perhaps in a situation more conducive to their success, as in a family of yoga practitioners. The practice of one’s past lives continue to live in the present, and yoga practitioners are not only purified through their many lives but also superior to the disciplined, wise, and devoted. Among yoga practitioners, Krishna explains that those who love and trust him are “the most closely joined to yoga.”

Krishna juxtaposes the different kinds of self he has outlined. There is the absolute self of Brahman, which is the truth of each person’s self and unifies all beings; there is the individual eternal self, which the wise realize is merely a fraction of Brahman like a drop of water in the ocean; and there is the worldly self, which is really only a body and not a true self at all. One interpretation of Krishna’s claim here is that the material self learns through yoga to elevate the higher self to the absolute self of Brahman.



Contrary to many common schools of thought in the Gita’s time, to Krishna, yoga is not about learning to better control one’s actions, but rather about learning to give up on control altogether. Its goal is not to teach the right kind or degree of desire, but to erode one’s attachment to desire altogether. The attachment to desire is closely associated with the “bond to pain,” which generally stems from unfulfilled desires that do not truly matter to the wise. This is because Brahman is self-sufficient, so the knowledge of it can lead one away from worldly attachments.



Arjuna acknowledges that he has far from achieved the absolute concentration that Krishna demands.



Arjuna recognizes that wisdom is a difficult goal, but Krishna assures him that it is worth trying even if one does not achieve wisdom in this lifetime or in the foreseeable future. One can nevertheless be rewarded in the next life, and the goal of enlightenment may require numerous lifetimes to achieve.



DISCOURSE 7

Krishna again implores Arjuna to follow yoga and take refuge in him, which will lead Arjuna to know him completely. Krishna then declares that he will explain this complete knowledge and the means of accessing it to eradicate any doubts Arjuna may harbor; with this knowledge, there is nothing left on earth to know. Few mortals seek fulfillment, and among those who succeed, few come to know Krishna. Krishna's prakriti, or "material nature," comprises eight elements: "earth, water, / fire, wind, / space, mind, / insight and / 'I'-making." He has a higher nature, too, which is the life that holds up the world and from which all beings spring. Krishna also dissolves the world, and there is nothing higher than him.

Krishna explains that he comprises everything, including the waters' taste and the sound of "Om," the Earth's smell and the discipline of yoga practitioners. He is the "ancient seed of all beings," and beings' desire to follow dharma. While Krishna is not in the gunas of sattva, rajas, and tamas, they are all in him, and they confuse those in the world who are not aware of Krishna's higher presence. Their divine, creative power is difficult to overcome, and only refuge in Krishna can teach people to do so.

Evil people are stuck on a demonic path and lack wisdom, which Krishna's creative power revokes. Four kinds of good people—the afflicted, knowledge-seekers, those with a goal, and the wise—honor Krishna, but the one with wisdom is uniquely distinguished, and Krishna loves them as they love him, and is indeed joined to him. Observant ones whose desire usurps their wisdom follow other gods, but anyone who wants to honor Krishna by worshipping him with trust receives his trust in return and fulfills their desire to honor him.

Many do not realize that Krishna is formless, and "the confused world" cannot see him, "unborn, / and imperishable" and aware of all beings, ones who have unified with him, those who exist now, and those yet to be. But no one knows him. Through hatred, desire, and the world's apparent dualities, beings "end up in delusion" unless they act purely and devote themselves to Krishna, which allows them to reach a timeless freedom in "the highest being, / the highest god, / the highest sacrifice" and join Krishna.

Again, the self, Brahman, and Krishna are one and the same. The eight components that Krishna lists are also components of the material self, and curiously, this includes the opposed forces that lead one to purity and desire: insight and 'I'-making (or ego and possessiveness). This affirms that action (including yoga) is actually a function of the lower self, which is also what dissolves in wisdom. Krishna is at once the creator, preserver, and destroyer, which suggests that he represents not just Vishnu (the preserver) but also Brahma and Shiva (the creator and destroyer). This is consistent with some forms of Hinduism that take Vishnu as encompassing all three.



As the absolute, Krishna encompasses all that exists, although his essence does not include everything, which is why the gunas can be in him although he is not in them. It may seem paradoxical that the gunas are "divine" and "creative," like Krishna, but this is likely because they are the fundamental forces composing and driving the action of material things. They come directly from the divine and create action.



Curiously, the divine itself punishes evil people by blocking them from wisdom. Krishna sees that not everyone who honors him does so for the right reasons: some do so out of moral desperation or a desire for knowledge, but the knowledgeable and morally fulfilled people who honor him for the sake of sacrifice are the only ones who go directly to heaven.



Krishna reveals the most mysterious and unfathomable aspect of himself: he has no form at all, and he exceeds everything that exists and stands outside time itself. The opacity of his statements here sets up his revelations to Arjuna in the tenth and eleventh discourses.



DISCOURSE 8

Arjuna asks Krishna a series of questions. He first asks what Brahman, the highest self, and action are. Then, he asks how Krishna speaks of the highest being and the highest god, what the highest sacrifice is, and whether the restrained sages know Krishna when they depart to join him. Krishna responds that Brahman is the imperishable, and the highest self is one's nature, from which "all states of being" emerge. Action is "sending forth," "finite existence" is the highest being for the embodied, and "the great spirit" is the greatest of the gods. The highest sacrifice is Krishna himself, "here in this body," and one who remembers him joins his state of being in death.

In death, one goes to "whatever state of being / one remembers" in that moment, so by always remembering Krishna, even during battle, Arjuna can join him. By practicing yoga and meditating on the formless "ancient one" who supports everything, one can ensure ascension to "this divine, highest spirit" in death. The path of asceticism, a dispassionate and celibate path on which one only desires knowledge of the infinite, restricts the body, and concentrates on "Om," leads one on "the highest way."

One who does not stray should have no trouble joining Krishna instead of being reborn in another body, "that impermanent / place of sorrow." Souls cycle through rebirths, besides those who find Krishna. Everything with form comes from the formless and dissolves back into it after completing the cycle, which Krishna explains as the coming and going of cosmic days and nights. This formless state of being is "imperishable;" it does not disappear when "all beings are lost," and no being returns from it. This is the highest state, which incorporates all beings and through which the world is "woven."

People can move along this path either at the height of day with a waxing moon when the sun lies to the north, or in the night with a darkening moon when the sun lies to the south. These paths of light and dark are eternal. By following the way of light, one does not return to the world, but by following the way of dark, one is reborn. But one who properly practices yoga, rather than merely offering sacrifices and gifts, bypasses rebirth and "goes to the ancient / highest place."

Again, Arjuna asks Krishna to clarify some of the concepts he has introduced. Krishna answers each of Arjuna's questions in turn, perhaps creating more mystery than he resolves. Brahman and the highest self are one and the same, and God coming down to earth in the form of Krishna is the highest form of sacrifice because he takes up a material form in order to save Krishna and humanity from their ignorance.



Strictly speaking, Krishna does not declare that people must be thinking of him when they die in order to achieve transcendence. However, doing so is clearly a foolproof (if immensely difficult) means to enlightenment, and equivalent to the mindset of sacrifice. People's reincarnation into what they think about upon death might explain why the wicked (who probably die with wicked thoughts) tend to return to wicked bodies.



Nothing is created or destroyed because everything is eternal, and Krishna compares birth and death in the universe's purview to the way people awaken each morning afresh. Extending this analogy, the death of the body is like the eternal self's reincorporation into Brahman, which makes it an immortal part of God.



These two paths hearken back to the Vedic Upanishads (part of the Vedas), in which the moonlit path stands for meditation, and the path of the dark moon stands for the blind rehearsal of rituals. Krishna is suggesting that merely performing one's worldly duties is insufficient unless one does so with the proper knowledge and detachment from action.



DISCOURSE 9

Krishna promises to tell Arjuna a “most hidden secret” because he “does not sneer”: knowledge and wisdom, together, can purify him. This “kingly” secret encourages him to take pleasure in performing his dharma, which is necessary to supersede rebirth.

In this particular instance, Krishna appears to distinguish knowledge from wisdom: most likely, the former involves understanding the true nature of the self, and the latter involves applying that knowledge to proper living.



Krishna’s formless shape “is woven through” the world, and everything dwells in him, but not he in them. But then, Krishna immediately says that “neither do beings / dwell in me.” He affirms that he bears beings and causes their existence, but does not dwell in them. He compares this to a wind that always dwells in the sky. Every being enters Krishna’s substance as the cycle of an epoch ends, and he sends all beings back into the world as a new age is born. However, these beings are powerless, and Krishna does not cling to his acts of creation. He creates material things as still and moving, leading the world to evolve on its own terms. When he takes on a human form, many beings feel contemptuous, ignorant of his true nature “as the great lord / of beings.” Their “hopes, / actions / and wisdom / are all in vain,” for their nature is “fiendish, demonic / and deluded.”

Krishna sets up three further paradoxes: God’s shape is formless, he affects everything but is not affected by anything (he sets the universe in motion but does not continue to interfere with it), and, despite his removed stance as the prime mover, he nevertheless comes down to transmit wisdom in the form of Krishna. The first paradox is merely a linguistic trick, and Krishna explains the second through the analogy of wind: every leaf, animal, and particle in the sky dwells in the wind, but the wind does not exist in any of those individual things. To resolve the third, the reader might think of Krishna not as the literal voice of God, but rather as a being created by God with absolute sattvic wisdom and then allowed to run his course in the world. However, this might fail to explain the divine form Krishna takes on in the eleventh discourse.



Great, divine people honor Krishna “as the imperishable one, / the beginning of all beings” with continual praise, devotion, and yoga. Others sacrifice to him by gaining the wisdom to recognize his multifaceted oneness. Krishna declares himself the intention, the sacrifice, and the offerings one gives in sacrifice; the father, mother, and grandfather of the world; the purifier, the “Om,” and the Vedas; the way, the seer, home, “birth, death and sustenance,” and the “eternal seed;” heat and rain, one who holds back and sends out, immortality and death, “being and non-being.”

Krishna begins announcing that he subsumes different components of the same processes and even apparent opposites, which leads up to his insistence that he includes all being and non-being whatsoever, as well as that which surpasses the duality between being and non-being.



Krishna reminds Arjuna that wise, pure, and sacrificial people who follow the Vedas will reach heaven and its “divine pleasures.” But then, once they enjoy the warrior god Indra’s heaven and lose their merit, they return to the “mortal realm” and, following dharma, participate in the world of desire and things. Krishna brings yoga’s “secure peace” to those who honor and think of him, and those who sacrifice to other gods fail to sacrifice to Krishna in the right way, for he is the end of all sacrifices, their “enjoyer” and “ruler.” One can choose the other gods, the ancestors, or the ghosts, but only choosing Krishna and sacrificing to him in a state of purity can lead one to him. All Arjuna does, takes, offers, gives, and strives for should be for Krishna’s sake.

Although Krishna repeats his previous claim that the enlightened stay in heaven to enjoy “secure peace” and eternal pleasure, he also suggests that some who enter heaven can fall from dharma and return to the world. He is likely pointing to a difference between those who simply worship lesser gods according to the Vedas—which speak of a heaven different from the eternal unity with Brahman that Krishna promises—and those who fully and solely worship the Supreme Being. Krishna is not denying the existence of the Vedic heaven (which would likely prove controversial with early Hindu audiences) but rather merely suggesting that this lesser heaven exists as something of a rest-stop along the cycle of death and rebirth, which culminates in a truer, eternal, Brahmanic heaven.



Krishna does not love or hate beings, but those who honor him are within him, and vice versa. Even an evildoer who honors Krishna has begun on the right path and started to become good. This evildoer can quickly progress through dharma to “eternal peace.” No devotee of Krishna’s can be lost, and even women, vaishyas, and shudras can find this “highest path.” Brahmins and sages are nevertheless more devoted, and Arjuna’s devotion will lead him to Krishna, “the highest goal.”

Krishna affirms that he is speaking to all Hindus: unity with the absolute is possible for everyone, regardless of their caste or moral orientation in the present life. He offers a profound, if improbable, opportunity for salvation to those at the bottom of the world’s social and ethical totem poles, who still have a higher eternal self, even if that self is more polluted than those of brahmins and sages.



DISCOURSE 10

Krishna tells Arjuna that he loves him and desires his well-being. Nobody, even among the gods and sages, knows Krishna’s origin, for he is their beginning. However, knowing Krishna as timeless, “without beginning,” can lead one to freedom from harm. All the kinds of being, including wisdom and dualities like pleasure and pain, came from Krishna. He brought forth humans’ ancestors and recognizing his originary power can lead people to join him through the yoga of insight, which destroys the darkness of ignorance.

Arjuna acknowledges Krishna as the highest being, an eternal, divine spirit, and notes that the sages who wrote the Vedas (including Vyasa) acknowledged him, too. He affirms that he believes all Krishna says and that nobody, not even the gods or demons, knows Krishna’s forms, for Krishna knows himself only through himself. However, Arjuna asks Krishna to disclose his divine forms, which allow Krishna to pervade the various realms of existence. Arjuna believes that only through acquaintance with these forms can he learn to constantly reflect on the divine. Arjuna asks for all the details, claiming he will “never tire / of hearing this nectar.”

Krishna promises to tell Arjuna about his forms, but only the primary ones, since his other forms are truly endless. First, he is the self, and all beings’ beginning, middle, and end. He is the Sama chant, the most important in the Vedas, as well as the great god Indra; he is the mind among the senses and thought among beings. He is the greatest in each category of lesser gods, “fire, the purifier,” and the mountain at the center of the universe. Of the priests, he is the greatest; of army chiefs, he is Skanda, the god of war; of waters, he is the ocean. He is the greatest of sages and the syllable “Om” among utterances, the **ashvattha tree** among trees, and so on—he continues through sages and chiefs, animals and the forces of nature.

Although Krishna just said that he does not love beings at the end of the previous discourse, he nevertheless professes his unique love for Arjuna at the beginning of this one. It is unclear whether this stems from Arjuna’s unique devotion or his simply being in the right time and place, at the historical moment when God has deemed dharma out of balance.



Krishna formally wins Arjuna’s absolute devotion; if Vyasa is truly the author of the Bhagavad Gita, he declares his devotion to Krishna here, too. This may be why Arjuna thinks he may be the first to learn Krishna’s forms, which already seem paradoxical insofar as Krishna has declared himself formless. Arjuna’s assurance that he will “never tire” reflects his understanding of the stable peace and ecstasy Krishna says people can find in unity with him and Brahman.



Krishna’s extensive list of forms not only establishes his supremacy in every aspect of the human and natural worlds, but crucially also offers the reader a preliminary index of important Hindu beliefs, scriptures, and gods. In this way, Vyasa offers Hindus a map of their religion’s ancient traditions and history through the Gita, suggesting not only which people, texts, and symbols are the holiest but also demonstrating how earlier, fragmented Hindu traditions can be sustained and unified through his work.



Krishna continues to elaborate his forms, declaring himself the “first, last / and middle” of creations, the highest form of insight, and discourse itself “among those who speak.” He is the link between words and the only imperishable arranger of the world; he is the death that takes everyone and the beginning of everything to come; the greatest of the female deities, chants, mantras, months, and seasons; and risk among cheaters, brilliance among the brilliant, and truth itself among its possessors. He is the greatest of each people, including Arjuna among the Pandavas and Vyasa among the wise. He is authority among rulers, wise conduct among those desiring victory, silence among that which is hidden and wisdom among the wise. He is “the ancient seed of all beings,” for nothing would exist without him.

Krishna explains that his forms are endless but he has demonstrated his power’s enormity through these examples. Any powerful being only requires Krishna to use “a small part” of his “brilliance.” And yet Krishna asks what “this abundant wisdom” matters to Arjuna—for he can sustain the entire world with only a fragment of himself.

Krishna turns from identifying as specific exemplars of defined categories to declaring himself the very principles in virtue of which certain forms of being and action are possible in the first place. He stands outside and above categories like creation and “those who speak” as their condition of possibility, which reflects his insistence that he is the fundamental grounds of all being and non-being, rather than one being among others. By specifically naming Arjuna and Vyasa, Krishna also testifies to their exemplary status and comments on the central role he wants the Gita to play in Hinduism.



The list of forms merely evokes Krishna’s power rather than truly capturing it: although it lasts twenty verses (half the tenth discourse), Krishna insists that no finite explication can capture his true, infinite power. Similarly, the world is infinitesimal in comparison to God, which suggests that his power greatly exceeds the human capacity for imagination. This might explain why he believes it so difficult for people to understand his true, formless, eternal, all-creating nature.



DISCOURSE 11

Arjuna declares that Krishna has told him “the highest mystery” of the “highest self” and banished his confusion. He explains that Krishna has told him at length about two things: beings’ beginning and end, and Krishna’s own “imperishable greatness.” But Arjuna still wants to see Krishna’s highest form and asks the god to show him.

Krishna proclaims that he will show Arjuna his thousand different divine forms, in various colors and shapes, which include various other deities that no one has ever seen before, as well as the entire world and anything else that Arjuna wants to see. However, Arjuna cannot see Krishna’s “powerful yoga” with his human eyes, so Krishna gifts him “the divine eye.”

Arjuna’s plea to see Krishna’s power reflects the distinction between intellectual and sensory understanding that led Krishna to advocate yoga above samkhya in the fifth discourse: it is possible to perceive God with the intellect, but far easier to infer his true nature after starting with a tangible, worldly proxy like a visual form.



Krishna grants Arjuna “the divine eye,” which is a viewpoint removed from any fixed spatiotemporal point in the material world, because he realizes that a human perspective is too limited to access the truth. In gifting Arjuna this vision, then, Krishna also affirms Arjuna’s own worthiness to become divine (which is what happens to the wise when they transcend the cycle of rebirth).



Sanjaya explains to Dhritarashtra that Krishna then showed Arjuna his highest form, with numerous eyes, mouths, weapons, garments, and scents. Krishna contained “every wonder” and looked “everywhere, / without end” with the brilliance of a thousand suns suddenly rising together.

The narrative briefly jumps back to the frame story but suggests that Sanjaya, too, was able to see Krishna’s divine form. Sanjaya is able to see what Arjuna can only see with the “divine eye” because Vyasa has granted him the ability to see everything—again, the power of the poet and the gods seems to mingle.



Arjuna saw the whole world together, unified yet divided in various ways, and bowed before Krishna in awe, proclaiming that he could see all the gods and beings in him, including Brahma, the sages, and the divine serpents. He sees Krishna everywhere, without a beginning, middle, or end. Although Krishna is hard to see, Arjuna sees his endless light completely and proclaims him the highest, “the great refuge of all,” dharma’s ancient and eternal protector, with the endless power of infinite limbs and a light that scorched the world.

Arjuna’s divine eye shows him a paradox: the whole world is contained in one figure, which demonstrates how Krishna, as the absolute, incorporates all beings. Krishna also includes the gods, which reflects his claim to be the highest of them all and the text’s desire to subsume previous Hindu scriptures (which largely focused on these particular gods) to the unitary God of the Gita.



Arjuna saw Krishna filling the realm separating the earth from the sky, causing the world to tremble, as did the gods and sages who sung praises to him. Seeing Krishna’s myriad colors, Arjuna trembled, too, able to “find neither / courage nor calm.” He asks for Krishna’s compassion, for in seeing the supreme god Arjuna realized that “I do not know the way, / and I find no refuge.”

Krishna unifies opposites by bridging the earth and sky, and the tremble he creates recalls the tremble the Pandavas’ divine horns caused at the beginning of the text. Yet Arjuna responds not with the equanimity of wisdom but rather with absolute terror—he again reverts from believing he is wise (he declared his confusion gone at this discourse’s outset) to realizing his ignorance.



Arjuna saw all of the Bharatas, the Pandavas and Kauravas alike, enter Krishna’s mouth and get crushed between his teeth, like river currents running toward the ocean or moths flying to their death in a fire. Arjuna declares that Krishna’s flames devour the world, and that his rays “burn the earth, / even as they fill it / with light.” He asks who Krishna is in this “terrible form” and honors him, asking for compassion and knowledge, since he cannot understand the god.

The visual of the Bharatas entering Krishna’s mouth represents the god’s insistence that they will all eventually die and return to formless eternity, which is his basis for encouraging Arjuna to fight dutifully rather than fear his cousins’ deaths. Krishna’s light destroys as it illuminates, scorching the earth in order to subsume it to his universality, just as a wise person must give up the world in order to unite with Krishna.



Krishna proclaims that he has come “to destroy the worlds,” for the Pandavas and Kauravas will die regardless of Arjuna’s presence. So Arjuna must fight for his honor and kingdom, since his enemies are already destroyed—Arjuna is a mere instrument, but will certainly vanquish the Kauravas in battle.

Krishna explicitly connects the vision he offers Arjuna to the outcome of the war. In a way, Arjuna gets to experience the cathartic terror of watching his family die, which may prepare him for the prospect of having to kill them and prevent him from attaching himself emotionally to them in the future.



Sanjaya explains that Arjuna again bowed before Krishna, proclaiming that everyone rightly honors and fears him. He declares Krishna the highest, endless, all-knowing, and all-pervading. Arjuna heaps praise upon the god, honoring him “on all sides” because he is everywhere. Arjuna apologizes for ignorantly considering Krishna his friend, asking instead whether there can be anything greater than the “Incomparable One.” He asks for mercy and patience, declaring his delight and endless fear at becoming the first to see Krishna’s true form before asking Krishna to take on his previous form as a charioteer.

Krishna explains that he showed his highest form for the first time out of favor to Arjuna—not even the greatest Vedic sages or devotees were able to see him, so Arjuna should not fear. Krishna shows his divine form again, but then returns to his “pleasing, / gentle appearance” in human form, and Arjuna declares that he has composed himself and his thoughts have returned to normal. Krishna reminds Arjuna that his divine form was hard to see, and the gods have not even seen it, for the only way to perceive him is through “devotion that has / no other object,” action on his behalf, and a refusal to cling to worldly goals.

DISCOURSE 12

Arjuna asks who is wiser: those who always practice yoga and devote themselves to the personal form of Krishna or those who honor his formless, imperishable manifestation. Krishna responds that those who practice yoga while thinking of him are “the most joined to yoga,” but those who honor the imperishable reach him, too. This latter group faces greater pain and difficulty, while those who give all actions to Krishna and perform yoga better honor him.

Krishna explains that all who think constantly and singularly about him with the proper insight will be uplifted beyond the whims of death and reincarnation. Those who cannot do this should undertake yoga to reach God. Those who cannot practice yoga should focus on Krishna’s work, because acting for his sake can lead them to fulfillment. And those who cannot do this should devote themselves to Krishna’s power in order to learn to give up the fruits of action. Letting go of action’s fruits leads to peace, so doing so it is better than the focused mind, which is better than wisdom, which is better than mechanical practice.

Arjuna reaffirms his devotion to Krishna and speaks for the community of Hindus at large, suggesting that readers should find a similar kind of devotion at this moment in the text. However, out of terror, Arjuna takes back his claim to love the god, which seems to run counter to Krishna’s insistence that wise people devote themselves to him lovingly and demonstrate that Arjuna still has not achieved true wisdom.



Surely enough, Krishna promises Arjuna that he should not dread the power of the divine, suggesting that a model of mutual, friendly devotion is appropriate in worship despite the obvious power differential between gods and humans. Arjuna has seen Krishna because of his devotion, not because of his knowledge or wisdom in action (the two paths on which Krishna has focused thus far). Unsurprisingly, then, much of the remaining discourses focus on the path of devotion (*bhakti*).



Arjuna’s question echoes the revelation he has just received: Krishna expressed his true power to Arjuna but can never directly show him his true, formless self, which cannot be perceived with the senses and is therefore much more difficult to grasp than an embodied form with the power of the infinite.



Although Krishna first elevates insight above yoga, he appears to then advocate the opposite: detachment above focus (through yoga), focus above insight, and insight above sacrifice. Krishna may be offering two contradictory hierarchies of worship because different forms of worship are suited to different people. However, there may also be subtle differences between the kinds of practices he discusses in each section: fixation on Krishna is a devotional practice of the focused mind, so it includes detachment from the fruits of action and requires wisdom; yoga builds this focus, detachment, and wisdom, which is why it would offer a viable alternative for those unable to fixate on Krishna directly.



One who lacks hatred, a sense of self and ownership, and the distinction between pain and pleasure is dear to Krishna; so is the controlled and insightful yoga practitioner who devotes themselves to him, as is the one who does not tremble before the world and avoids pleasure, impatience, fear, and anxiety. Krishna continues enumerating qualities of a devotee, suggesting that they must overcome duality and steadily trust his absolute power.

By this stage in the Gita, because Krishna has revealed his true form, Arjuna has clearly switched from an impersonal, intellectual relationship with truth and God to a personal, devotional one; he has moved from trusting Krishna because of his wisdom to trusting Krishna because he is the divine. His willingness to face terror and anxiety at the sight of Krishna's divine form suggests that Arjuna has begun to adopt the characteristics Krishna enumerates here and convert himself into a wise devotee.



DISCOURSE 13

Arjuna asks Krishna about the body and spirit as objects of wisdom. Krishna says that beings can grasp the "sacred ground" of knowledge, but must also learn what it is that knows the sacred ground—wisdom requires knowing both the lower material and the higher knowing selves. He promises to explain each of these in turn.

Krishna briefly describes the sacred ground: it includes "awareness of 'I,'" insight, the senses and their powers, desire and pleasure, hatred and pain, the body, and thought. But an absence of arrogance, deceit, and harm; a commitment to patience, purity, and restraint; indifference to the senses and a refusal of the self; a lack of clinging to worldly desires and outcomes; and endless devotion to Krishna in yoga: all these qualities comprise the true wisdom of the "supreme self."

Although yoga aims to transcend the body, one must understand what comprises the body (as one must come to know the true self) before one can learn to hold back its forces.



One gains immortality by coming to know Brahman, which lies beyond the world and is "said to be neither being / nor non-being." This pervades everything, even though it is immaterial; it "bears all" without clinging and partakes of the gunas despite having none. It is inside and outside, far and near, too subtle for most to understand. It is what bears beings, "the absorber / and creator." It lies beyond light and darkness, constituting wisdom's content and its goal.

Krishna explains that a devotee who understands the sacred ground, wisdom, and wisdom's object can become one with him. He tells Arjuna that matter and spirit have no beginning, and that gunas and transformation come from matter, as do cause and effect, whereas pleasure and pain are grounded in the spirit, which can reside in matter and cling to the gunas. Indeed, one is born only because the spirit clings to gunas. The highest spirit or highest self is that which observes.

The body comprises far more than physical things and the senses; it includes what many would consider the "mind," which demonstrates that the body is what consciously learns to turn away from the material world before this wisdom is encoded in the eternal self. Therefore, even though the body is the seat of self-awareness, the eternal self is the seat of wisdom because "wisdom" figures more as an orientation toward existence than a conscious form of knowledge.



Brahman supersedes not only dualities that exist in the world but also the duality of being and non-being that governs what is and is not in the world. This is because, as Krishna has previously argued, Brahman is everywhere and pervades everything, even the material world and its gunas, even though it is itself immaterial and formless.



The "sacred ground" is not only the lower self, but also that which must be known in order for one to gain true knowledge. Although pleasure and pain are evidence of one's unwise attachment to the world, they nevertheless reside in the spirit because they arise from the way the spirit interacts with the gunas (especially rajas, or passion).



Some can “see the self / in the self, / through the self,” in meditation; others use the yoga of samkhya and others the yoga of action. Others still pass “beyond death” through devotion, even if they only come to know the self through testimony from others.

Krishna confirms that there are three separate, equally valid paths to transcendence: knowledge, action, and devotion. Although seeing the self in the self seems like a form of knowledge, it is subtly different from samkhya: the former comes from perceiving the self directly, whereas the second comes from abstract philosophical thought.



Anything that comes into being emerges from the union between the sacred ground and the knower. One who sees the highest lord everywhere, does not harm the self, realizes that they are not the agent of their material actions, and sees a multiplicity of ways of being everywhere can move beyond death. The imperishable self lacks gunas, a beginning, or action; it is like space, everywhere yet unmarked by anything that occupies it. It illuminates the sacred ground like the sun illuminates the earth. Knowing the difference between this sacred ground and the knower can lead people to the freedom of the highest realm.

All material things exist at the juncture of lower and higher selves, so their character relies upon the particular understanding that the knower (higher self) develops about the sacred ground (lower self). Wisdom means seeing the higher self that is immanent in all lower selves (recognizing that everything has the same kind of essential higher self and is therefore a dimension of the same universal being) while still sharply distinguishing between what properly belongs to the higher self and what does not.



DISCOURSE 14

Krishna promises to again tell Arjuna the highest wisdom, which brought the sages fulfillment and the dissolution of self. Krishna declares that Brahman is his “womb,” from which everything emerges, and he is the father who plants the seeds of being.

The three gunas—sattva, rajas, and tamas—inhere in matter and bind the imperishable self to the body. Sattva brings light, binding people to joy and wisdom. Rajas is passion and binds the soul to action; tamas, which comes from ignorance and confusion, binds the soul by means of “sleep, laziness / and distraction.” Sattva connects people to joy, rajas to action, and tamas to neglect.

The imagery of the womb explains how Brahman can supersede the distinction between being and non-being: it does not coexist with material things, but it nevertheless creates them.



Krishna finally outlines the natures of the three gunas whose influence the soul must overcome in order to achieve enlightenment. Although sattva is material, it is also clearly the central component of those who are wise and close to transcending the body.



Each guna can prevail above the others, but sattva is clearly prevailing when one finds light and wisdom in one's body. Greed, restlessness, and lust emerge when rajas prevails, and darkness, sloth, and confusion come to the fore when tamas dominates a person. Sattva leads embodied beings to dissolution, but those dominated by rajas and tamas are reborn "clinging to action" and "in the wombs / of the deluded," respectively. Sattva leads to stainless action and wisdom, rajas to pain and greed, tamas to ignorance and confusion. Those with sattva rise, those with rajas stay in the middle, and those with tamas descend to morally worse states. When the observing eternal self sees that the agent of action is comprised of the gunas yet realizes their limits, it knows it has reached Krishna's own being and achieved eternal freedom from pain and the cycle of death and rebirth.

Arjuna asks what marks one who has transcended the gunas and how one goes about doing so. Krishna responds that one must relinquish hatred and desire for confusion, exertion, and brightness; one must remain unshaken by the gunas and instead see their motion; and one must lose the distinction between opposites like pleasure and pain, the loved and unloved, praise and blame, and honor and dishonor. Of course, one must also devotedly serve Krishna, who supports immortal Brahman, everlasting dharma, and the "unique joy" that they bring.

DISCOURSE 15

Krishna describes the "imperishable" **ashvattha tree**, whose roots extend into the air and branches burrow underground; its leaves are the Vedas' sacred knowledge. The branches grow through the gunas, creating sensory objects, and from the roots grow human action. But the tree's true form and ongoing life cannot be seen here, until "the strong axe / of non-clinging" cuts the roots of action and one can find the ancient spirit from which activity originated and go to the "imperishable place" beyond life and death.

The sun, the moon, and flame do not light up Krishna's "highest dwelling place." The eternal selves "in the realm of the living" are a fragment of Krishna that draw in the worldly senses as well as the sixth sense, the mind. When the self enters or departs a body, the senses go with it; this self rules the senses and enjoys their objects, but only the wise can see this, and even many dedicated practitioners of yoga cannot despite their effort.

Rajas's connection to attached action and tamas's tie to laziness demonstrate why the crucial question for the sage is not whether to act or relinquish action, but rather why and how to act with purity. In a sense, then, rajas and tamas are also opposites (rajas is about the passionate pursuit of worldly goals and tamas about the lack of goals and true knowledge alike), even though both are opposed to sattva's purity and wisdom. Krishna again emphasizes that the body, which is made of gunas, is also the faculty that must learn to turn away from them toward a higher power.



Again, Arjuna wants to know how precisely he might achieve enlightenment or confirm that he is successfully on a path towards it. Although Krishna's message remains the same, the exposition of the gunas he has offered in this discourse should allow Hindus to more precisely identify and understand their motions in the world.



The complex metaphor of the ashvattha tree comes from the Vedic Upanishads; these trees grow boundlessly in every direction, much like the limitless Brahman that has no conceivable beginning, middle, or end. Yet, like the eternal self that is a fragment of Brahman, the tree is rooted in the world and one must learn to uproot it in order to unite with the immateriality of the imperishable divine.



Krishna's reference to the light of the world and the serene darkness of eternity recalls the imagery of him scorching the earth, destroying it as he brings it to enlightenment, as well as emphasizing that transcendence should not be conceived through the senses. The self again figures as an outside observer on the world, an awareness privy to the senses but not their seat.



Krishna notes that the sun's brilliance continually lights up the world, even if from the moon's reflection or in fire. That brilliance is his own, for he sustains all beings, forming their breath and the "memory, wisdom and reason" in their hearts. He even created and knows the Vedas. There is a destructible spirit in the world—beings—but also the indestructible one that stands above them. And there is a highest spirit, the highest self, that sustains the three worlds, and that is Krishna. The clear-minded recognize and devote themselves to him. He can tell people "this most secret rule," leading them to become "filled with insight" and achieve wisdom when they awake.

The world's light is also a dimension of Krishna—the fact that all light and energy on the earth originates in the sun also offers a salient metaphor for Krishna's ability to sustain the world without taking part in it. The "three worlds" Krishna references are most likely the Vedic worlds of heaven, sky, and earth.



DISCOURSE 16

Krishna elaborates some crucial characteristics that exemplify one "born / to the divine condition": truthfulness, fearlessness, wisdom, self-control and sacrifice, discipline and study, peacefulness and compassion, modesty and energy, courage and moderation. Conversely, fraud, hostility, anger, and ignorance exemplify birth in the "demonic condition." The divine condition brings freedom and the demonic one bondage, but Arjuna was born to the first.

Although people have control over their degree of attachment to the gunas, Krishna makes it clear that each individual has a particular nature that is more or less suited to achieving enlightenment and related to one's orientation in past lives. He also confirms that Arjuna's worthiness for wisdom comes partly from this inborn nature.



There are divine and demonic beings, but Krishna has not yet explicated the latter. "Demonic men" do not comprehend effort or purity, goodness or truth. They refuse god and believe the earth was "caused by desire." As enemies, they want to destroy the world and cannot overcome desire, proclaiming false ideas and feeling endless anxiety. They cling hopefully to the goal of dissolution but only truly want to fulfill their desires and anger, seeking wealth and power, sacrificing out of ignorance, pride, and confusion rather than devotion.

Demonic people are governed by rajas, focused solely on worldly desires. Crucially, one can undertake all the rituals of worship Krishna advocates and still be demonic if one does them out of a desire for worldly or spiritual advancement, rather than for the sake of sacrifice (from which spiritual advancement results nevertheless).



Krishna ensures that the demonic are reincarnated in demonic wombs. The most sinister vices are greed, anger, and desire. Those governed by tamas set themselves on a path to hell, and tamas must be cast off to ensure enlightenment. By rejecting the Vedic laws and following one's own desires, one loses the opportunity to find fulfillment, happiness, and transcendence. Therefore, it is crucial for people to know and obey Vedic law.

Krishna again sustains the authority of the Vedas while subsuming them to his own teachings and resolving the contradictions between the two sets of beliefs. In this case, "Hell" is not an afterlife, but rather the conundrum of proceeding through cycles of rebirth without advancement while clinging to the world and losing sight of the real, higher self. Worship in accordance with Vedic law may not bring people directly to Krishna, but it still appears as a step along the path from ignorance to enlightenment because it forces people to acknowledge the truth of a higher power.



DISCOURSE 17

Arjuna asks Krishna what happens to those who abandon Vedic law but nevertheless perform sacrifices with a trust in the gods. Krishna says that trust follows the three gunas, for “humans are made / of trust; / they grow to become / whatever they trust.” The sattvic sacrifice for the gods, the rajasic for the demons, and the tamasic to “the dead / and gangs of ghosts.” Those who undertake discipline outside the bounds of Vedic law and remain caught up in “I-making and fraud, / together with force, / rage and desire” demonically harm themselves and their spirits.

Similarly, there are three kinds of food, sacrifice, heated bodily discipline, and gifts. Sattvic foods are satisfying, pleasant, healthy, flavorful and smooth; rajasic foods are spicy, salty, sour, and rough, leading to disease and pain; tamasic food, including leftovers and what is spoiled or tasteless, is unfit for sacrifice.

Sattvic sacrifice follows Vedic law, and the giver thinks only of the sacrifice and not of any goal. Those who sacrifice rajasically consider a material goal for their sacrifice at the same time as the sacrifice itself, and tamasic sacrifices ignore Vedic law and simply discard food.

The body’s “heated discipline” involves “purity, virtue, / chastity and / absence of harm.” Truthful and beneficial speech, including study of the Vedas, is “the heated discipline / of the word.” And the “heated discipline / of the mind” involves clarity, gentleness, silence, self-control, and purity. These three disciplines are sattvic when performed in trust and without a desire for ends; rajasic when done for the sake of social status or respect; and tamasic when destructive or delusional.

Gifts given simply for the sake of goodwill are sattvic, those given for the sake of some reward or benefit are rajasic, and those given wrongly—disrespectfully, to the wrong person or in the wrong context—are tamasic.

Brahman’s “threefold / designation” is “Om tat sat,” or (roughly) “Om is the truth.” Anyone who sacrifices, gives gifts, or performs heated discipline while uttering this must be thinking of Brahman, acting steadfastly and without interest in action’s fruits.

The Gita continues to contextualize the ancient Vedic teachings in relation to its own. Arjuna asks if the teachings can be separated, and although Krishna does not reject this possibility outright, he suggests that Vedic sacrifice may reflect and prove someone’s sattvic nature. Sacrificial practice evidences people’s trust in the godly, demonic, or undead higher powers they worship, which explains why each guna governs a different kind of sacrifice.



Sattvic foods are eaten because of their purity, rajasic ones for the sake of sensations they create, and tamasic ones out of ignorance or neglect.



Krishna again admonishes those who pursue asceticism out of clinging, presumably giving up their natural purpose or dharma in the human world in order to relentlessly pursue their desire for material or spiritual advancement.



Heated discipline, or austerity, is subtly different from yoga, which teaches people to concentrate directly on achieving the proper knowledge or orientation toward action. Rather, heated discipline might be seen as the equivalent of yoga for the path of devotion.



The model of action as sacrifice also applies to things people do on behalf of one another; dharma encompasses properly performing one’s social (or caste) duties as well as properly worshipping the divine.



The last word of the chant, “sat,” has the same root as “sattvic;” essentially, “Om” has the essence of sattva. Chanting is a foolproof form of devotion, which allows people to concentrate their minds on sattva and Brahman through pure devotion and trust, separately from the paths of action and knowledge.



DISCOURSE 18

Arjuna asks about what renunciation and letting go truly entail. Krishna explains that renunciation is “the leaving aside / of action based on desire” while letting go is “giving up / of all fruit of such action.” Some wise people think all action should be relinquished because it is “full of wrong,” but others think there are good actions, like “discipline, / giving and sacrifice,” that should not be relinquished.

Krishna thinks these actions are important purifiers and must be undertaken, but only after one learns to stop clinging to action’s fruits. Renouncing such prescribed actions is actually tamasic; quitting actions because they are difficult or painful is rajasic; but undertaking prescribed action for its own sake, without an attention to its fruit, is sattvic. Intelligent actors neither “cling to / auspicious actions” nor hate inauspicious ones.

Anyone with a body cannot abandon action entirely, but one who successfully abandons an interest in action’s fruit is known as a tyagi. A tyagi dies without the fruit of action, but one who cannot renounce it dies with wanted, unwanted, and mixed fruits. There are five causes behind all actions of any sort: the body, the agent, the means, the motions, and divine will. But one who believes they are the only agent lacks insight, whereas one without a sense of ownership is neither stained nor bound by action, and indeed truly “does not kill” when he kills others, even others who are also tyagis.

There are three impulses behind action: wisdom, the knower, and the object to be known. There are also three factors: an agent, an act, and a means. These all follow the gunas: in sattvic action, one sees all beings as eternal and multiplicities as a whole; in rajasic action, one sees separate natures in different beings; and in tamasic action, one clings to action without motives, missing action’s “true aim.” Similarly, in sattvic action one has no desire for the fruits, in a rajasic action one does have such a desire, and in tamasic action one does not even properly consider the act’s consequences.

Although Krishna praised renunciation in the fifth discourse, he now argues that renunciation often stems from clinging to desire. Most likely, his terminology has shifted because he was still introducing the concept of renouncing the fruits of action in the fifth discourse but is now concerned with the difference between renouncing action and renouncing action’s fruits.



The path of devotion is entirely predicated on action, so (even though it belongs to the lower self) action in accordance with dharma and without attachment to desire is actually indispensable to moral progress. In this way, Krishna begins circling back to his argument for why Arjuna should go to war.



To falsely believe oneself the agent of action is to forget about the distinction between the eternal fragment of Brahman that constitutes the true self and the material gunas that actually drive all action in the world. Krishna hints that Arjuna should have no qualms about killing his cousins. Before, Krishna tried to dissuade Arjuna from desiring the preservation of his familial ties, but now that he has shown Arjuna that wisdom is the only measure of an individual, he also shows that, even if the Kauravas are wise, dharma requires Arjuna to fight them.



For Krishna, the source of action is actually a will to knowledge: a tyagi (the knower) will act sacrificially as a means to wisdom and enlightenment. Acting with discipline means practicing detachment from desire and better understanding the gunas that form the material self (the object to be known). A tyagi sees Brahman everywhere, at all times, as the true essence of every being. In contrast, a rajasic actor mistakes differentiated material bodies for beings’ true identities.



There are also three varieties of insight and courage, corresponding to the gunas: sattvic insight understands what is and is not to be done and feared, rajasic action does not discern these distinctions, and tamasic action inverts them, leading people to perform the opposite of dharma. Steadiness in yoga, actions, and breath are sattvic; steadiness in wealth, desire, and dharma for the sake of action's fruits is rajasic; and the steadiness of a "dull-witted" attachment to "pain, fear and sleep" is tamasic. Similarly, there are three forms of joy. Sattvic joy begins like poison but turns into nectar, for it stems from clear insight about the self. Rajasic joy starts like nectar but transforms into poison. And tamasic joy is deluded throughout, stemming from "confusion, laziness / and sleep."

No being is free from the three gunas, regardless of caste, which reflects people's inner nature—brahmins act from an inner purity, discipline, wisdom, and restraint; kshatriyas act from ferocity, courage, and generosity; vaishyas act from their natural inclination to "trade, cow-herding and ploughing;" and shudras' nature is to serve. Contentment in one's action according to these purposes can lead one to fulfillment, and this requires honoring the eternal, all-encompassing creator in all actions.

It is always better to perform one's own dharma than another's, even if one does not perform it perfectly—after all, first tries are usually imperfect. Insight and a renunciation of desire lead to fulfillment and Brahman, "the highest state / of wisdom." One must cast off sense objects and passions, prioritizing the yoga of meditation and accepting "a state without passion" to overcome one's sense of pride, ownership and grasping. This leads to a tranquility, unity with Brahman, and devotion, which engender a close knowledge of Krishna's extent, which in turn allows people to enter him and find "an imperishable, / unchanging home" in eternity.

By investing in a "sense of 'mine'" and deciding not to fight, Krishna says, Arjuna dooms himself to death and loses all hope of reaching Brahman. Krishna insists that Arjuna is bound by his nature, even to do things he does not want to do. "The lord of all beings," which dwells in the heart, causes all things to "wander in illusion" and follow the "great cosmic map" of their varied natures.

Krishna also circles back to the concept of dharma, for valuable insight is precisely insight into dharma. Sattvic joy might feel poisonous at first because one has to find pleasure in the abstract knowledge that one is performing dharma and coming closer to God rather than the familiar, concrete fulfillment of desire. Conversely, sensitization to achieving what one desires can lead to greed and gluttony, which makes rajasic joy later turn to poison.



Krishna makes explicit the connection among caste, the inner nature of the gunas, dharma, and enlightenment: caste reflects human nature, and dharma calls people to fulfill this nature by dutifully acting out their inherited caste roles. This worldview has since become one of the more controversial dimensions of Hinduism, for many argue that it functions to keep lower-caste people oppressed and confined to denigrating work in the name of religious worship.



Just as imperfect wisdom in one life still benefits the soul, which becomes reincarnated into a superior body, it is more important to strive to fulfill dharma than actually succeed in doing so. This is why Krishna has argued that, even if Arjuna loses the war, he will still ascend to heaven because he has acted dutifully in accordance with his dharma as a warrior.



Arjuna's initial concern with his family stemmed precisely from his "sense of 'mine,'" which he elevated above the task of dispassionately following his "cosmic map" in order to let his gunas work themselves out and detach himself from them.



Krishna again tells Arjuna to take refuge in the wisdom he has learned, to ponder it, and then to act as he wishes. He tells him his most secret, “highest word,” which is that “you are greatly / loved by me, / so I will speak / for your benefit.” Krishna promises that, if Arjuna can maintain a focused mind and sacrifice for his honor, he will go to him and relieve him of evil.

Krishna tells Arjuna to never tell these truths to one who lacks discipline or devotion, or sneers at the god. However, he will certainly transcend life and death if he tells devoted people about “this highest, hidden truth.” Further, Krishna says that one who learns to recite their conversation undertakes a “sacrifice / of knowledge” to Krishna, as well as one who can hear it and trust in Krishna, would also achieve freedom.

Krishna asks whether Arjuna has listened “with focused thought” and overcome his “ignorance / and confusion.” Arjuna affirms that he has gained wisdom, shed delusion, and defeated his doubts. He agrees to do what Krishna asks.

Sanjaya tells Dhritarashtra that hearing this “miraculous” conversation “caused my hair / to stand on end.” He explains that, by Vyasa’s grace, he has heard the greatest and most secret yoga before his very eyes; he continues to rejoice as he continually remembers the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna, as well as the latter’s incredible form. He suggests that, wherever Krishna and Arjuna go, “splendour, / victory, well-being, / and wise conduct” will follow.

However, the decision is ultimately up to the individual, and action only counts as pure if one does it with the wisdom Arjuna has learned from Krishna. Accordingly, Arjuna’s search for insight and path of yoga are not instantly fulfilled in the Gita—rather, he must now learn to put Krishna’s lessons into practice.



Krishna explicitly charges Arjuna with ensuring that the Gita is transmitted to future generations of receptive Hindus through a tradition of oral recitation from memory, and so the text itself serves as God’s intervention to restore dharma in the universe.



Arjuna’s ability to converse deliberately with Krishna throughout the text reflects his budding ability to fixate his mind on the god, which is the key to transcendence via the path of knowledge. In this sense, learning the Gita is a form of the yoga of knowledge.



In his elation at the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, Sanjaya almost seems to begin rooting for the Pandavas over his own half of the Bharata clan. His response is a model of how observers can learn to practice yoga and pursue enlightenment through their encounters with the Gita and foreshadows Arjuna’s eventual victory in the war, to which the full version of the Mahabharata now turns.





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Anonymous. *The Bhagavad Gita*. Penguin. 2008.

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Anonymous. *The Bhagavad Gita*. New York: Penguin. 2008.