

From the *Gītā* (Translation by Stephen H. Phillips)

Hinduism cannot be counted a single religion, in comparison with the relative unity of Christianity or Buddhism. At best, it is a family of religious beliefs and practices, connected principally through a social organization in which caste plays an important role. For example, one of the classical philosophic schools defends the authority of the Veda (though with a dubious interpretation) and upholds caste, and for these two reasons has every right to be called a Hindu school of thought. However, the school is atheistic, and is antagonistic to the idea that “liberation” or any mystical experience is the supreme good. Theism and a doctrine of a mystical supreme goal for a person, are, on the other hand, central to much ancient, classical, and modern Hindu thought. Six distinct schools, some with many contending branches or subschools, were recognized in classical times as “orthodox,” though the Sanskrit word for “orthodox” is used to imply only (1) reverence for the Veda, which was rarely read, and (2) participation in a social organization including caste. There are no truly universally Hindu doctrines. Nevertheless, one may speak of scriptures and ideas that over the centuries have been more at the center of Hindu culture than others. And it is, to be sure, a theistic world view that more than any other has dominated Hindu belief and guided religious practices. And of all the many, many scriptures and sacred texts

that move, or have moved, the hearts of the devotees of God in India over the centuries, the *Bhagavadgītā* (or “*Gītā*”), the “Song of God” (c. 200 B.C.E.) stands out as culturally clearly the most important.

The *Gītā* is a small portion of a long epic poem. The epic’s story centers on a conflict over the succession to the throne of a princely state in the ancient civilization that extended along the massive Ganges River, which drains the Himalayas. The warrior Krishna is the ruler of a neighboring state, and throughout most of the long poem is an ordinary person, though an able, just, clever and politically astute leader. The key event of the entire epic is a battle involving not only cousins fighting cousins along with their local armies but the armies of many other kings and princes, such as Krishna’s, all drawn into the terrible conflagration. The political issues are complex, but the one side of the warring family, and not the other, has the just claim. The rightful heir with his four brothers and their allies are on one side; the usurper along with many noble and venerable sages and heroes fight against them. Krishna joins the battle-line as the charioteer for the third of the five brothers, a champion archer named Arjuna. The *Gītā* is a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna occurring just minutes before the battle begins. In it, Krishna ceases to present himself as a mere mortal and able warrior, and reveals himself to Arjuna as God incarnate, an *avatāra*, literally a divine

“descent” or “manifestation.” His advise to Arjuna is then not just the encouragement of a friend or the wise teachings of a guru, his words are the voice of God speaking to a human being in personal crisis—so the *Gītā* is understood by Hindu theists.

Arjuna’s crisis is principally ethical, though he also asks Krishna to remove his ignorance about the nature of things, persons, and God. At the beginning of the dialogue, he insists that it cannot be the morally right thing to do to fight and kill his kinsmen, teachers, friends and loved ones who face him on the far side of the field of Kurukṣetra. “No good do I see in killing my own family in battle. I desire not victory, nor rule, nor pleasures, Krishna; what is power to us, enjoyments, or life, Govinda? Those who make rulership desirable for us, and enjoyments and pleasures, it is they that are arrayed in battle (against us), abandoning life and wealth. Teachers, fathers, sons, grandfathers, uncles, in-laws—these I do not wish to kill even if it means that I must die, Krishna—not even to rule the three worlds, why then for the earth?”¹ Despite the passion and sincerity of moral feeling that Arjuna expresses, Krishna insists that the right thing to do in the circumstances is to fight, to kill the opposing

1. *Gītā* 1.31b-35.

warriors, and to win the battle.

There are many dimensions to Krishna's explanation why fighting is for Arjuna the right course of action; more commentary has been elicited by his response to Arjuna's plea than by any other comparably brief text, except perhaps the Christian Gospels. Krishna explains divine incarnation, i.e. the *avatāra* doctrine, rebirth (everyone is reborn until she reaches "liberation," *mukti*, equated with a mystical experience of God or Brahman), various paths and practices of yoga (i.e. self-discipline, especially meditation: more on yoga with the selection from the *Yoga-sūtra* below), the transcendence of God as well as the unity of the world with God (probably the *Gītā*'s central theological doctrine), *nirvāṇa* experience (considered identical with mystical experience of God or Brahman, although *nirvāṇa* is a Buddhist word and Buddhism and Hinduism are competing religions), evil, the purpose of creation, and the destiny of the individual soul. Some modern scholars see the *Gītā* as a grab-bag of philosophic and religious ideas not at all compatible one with another, while many of the classical exegetes are at great pains to show a conceptual unity. But to my mind, given the context in the larger poem, the teaching about action, and the spiritual attitude to take in acting, called *karma-yoga*, is at once what is most striking and most original in the work. The "yoga of action" (*karma-yoga*) is a discipline of acting in a

spirit of sacrifice without concern for personal benefit.

The verses translated below follow in the text Krishna's initial advice about a superior importance of attitude and regard for the soul to the desires that drive worldly actions. Arjuna has then asked why Krishna, in the face of what he has just said about the soul and about worldly desires, nevertheless is encouraging him to such a violent endeavor. The verses below are part of Krishna's reply.

Krishna explains the cosmic foundations of action, evoking a ritual image of sacrifice to which he gives new meaning. Next, he states his own motive in undertaking actions and in his very assuming of a mortal birth as the divine person and model for those who wish to live in the right way and, indeed, yogically transformed lives. He goes on to talk about human action in general again, and closes with a refrain recurring throughout the *Gītā*, namely, with injunctions about the practice of *yoga*, i.e. self- or spiritual discipline. It is through such discipline in general, whether *karma-yoga*, *jñāna-yoga*, or *bhakti-yoga*—these are the three paths that Krishna lays out: the yoga of action, the yoga of knowledge and meditation, and the yoga of love and devotion—that one may live a transformed life. Thus one would become in the end, like Krishna, a person aware of one's immortal soul as well as of God, or Brahman, the personal/impersonal Absolute.

Arjuna said:

3.1 Krishna, if you consider understanding superior to action, why then do you urge me on to an action so terrible?

3.2 It seems you would confuse my understanding with contradictory words. So tell me definitely that whereby I can attain the supreme good.

Krishna said:

3.3 There are in this world two fundamental stances declared by me of old, Arjuna: the yoga of knowledge for intellectuals, the yoga of action for yogins.

3.4 By abstaining from works, a person does not enjoy a mystical actionlessness; nor by renunciation alone is perfection attained.

3.5 For no one is able to remain even for a moment without acting; everyone willy-nilly is made to do work by the impulses (*guna*-s, modes) of Nature.

3.6 Self-deluded is he who sits controlling the faculties of action while at the same time thinking about the objects of experience. He is a hypocrite.

3.7 But a person controlling his senses with the mind and commencing a disciplined work (or *karma-yoga*) with his faculties of action, unattached, that person excels, Arjuna.

3.8 Do controlled work, for action is better than inaction. The very maintenance of your body would not be accomplished without work.

3.9 Without personal attachment undertake action, Arjuna, for just one purpose, for the purpose of sacrifice. From work undertaken for purposes other than sacrifice, this world is bound to the law of *karma*.²

3.10 Bringing forth creatures along with sacrifice, the Creator said of old, “With this may you bring forth fruit; let it be your horn-of-plenty (literally, wish-fulfilling cow).

3.11 “With this, may you make the gods flourish and may the gods make you flourish. Mutually fostering one another, you will attain the supreme good.

3.12 “For made to flourish by sacrifice, the gods will give you the enjoyments you desire. One who without giving to them enjoys their gifts is nothing but a thief.”

3.13 Good people eating the remains from sacrifices are free from sin. But those sinners eat evil who cook for their own sake.

3.14 From food beings come to be; the origin of food is from rain. Rain comes to be from sacrifice. Sacrifice has its origin in works.

2. The law of *karma* mentioned here is the view that any course of action that one undertakes creates a psychological tendency, or habit, to repeat it. One’s free will thus becomes limited by one’s own dispositions to action, or habits, dispositions that—according to much ancient Indian thought—continue even into a new birth. The inveterate smoker is drawn to the taste of tobacco at a young age in her next incarnation.

3.15 Know works to have their origin in Brahman, and Brahman its foundation in the Immutable. Therefore is the omnipresent Brahman established through all time in sacrifice.

3.16 The wheel is thus set in motion. One who does not follow its rounds, evil in intentions, sensual in delights, he lives in vain, Arjuna.

3.17 But the person delighting only in his higher Self and satisfied living in it—for such a person, thoroughly contented in the Self alone, there is nothing that must be done.

3.18 Nor is there for him any gain in what he has done or has not done. Nor do his interests depend in any way on anyone or anything else.

3.19 Therefore, ever unattached do the work that has to be done. For the person who is unattached in performing action attains the supreme good.

3.20 For by work alone did Janaka and others attain perfection. Considering also the holding together of society, you should be doing works.

3.21 Whatever the superior person does that indeed is what other folk try to do. The standard that he sets is what the world follows.

3.22 For me, there is nothing whatsoever that has to be done, Arjuna, in the three worlds; nor anything unattained that I need to attain. Still I continue in action.

3.23 For if I did not continue ever tirelessly in action, my example people

would follow, Arjuna, as they always do.

3.24 Societies would come apart if I were not to do works, and I would be the author of chaos in the world. I would destroy these creatures.

3.25 The unenlightened, who are attached to their actions, proceed in works, Arjuna; so should the enlightened, unattached, to hold together society.

3.26 One should not engender a division in the understanding of ignorant folk who are attached to their works; rather, knowing one should inspire them, performing all actions, himself disciplined.

3.27 Works in every fashion are being done by the impulses (or modes, *guṇa*-s) of nature. The person deluded by egotism thinks, “I am the doer of this work.”

3.28 But the one who knows what is real, Arjuna, concerning those impulses and the different types of action, realizing that the impulses operate on themselves, he is not attached.

3.29 Deluded by the impulses of nature, people are attached to its works. One whose knowledge is complete should not disturb the dull-witted whose knowledge is incomplete.

3.30 Concentrating on your higher Self, entrust all your actions to me. Be free of expectation and possessiveness. Fight, with your fever departed.

3.31 People who always follow this teaching of mine, with faith and

without griping, they too are freed from (the karmic consequences of) their actions.

3.32 But those who finding fault with this teaching of mine do not follow it, know them as confused by every bit of knowledge, lost and unaware.

3.33 Even a person with knowledge acts in accord with his own nature. Beings follow nature; what would coercing it avail?

3.34 Attraction and repulsion are set in the object of each sense. One should not allow oneself to come under their sway, for they are highwaymen endangering the path.

3.35 Better one's own right way (*dharma*) though flawed than the way of another perfectly followed; death following one's own way is better. The way of another is perilous.

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Krishna said:

4.1 This imperishable yoga I proclaimed to Vivasvān (the Sun God); Vivasvān declared it to Manu (the first human); Manu told it to Ikṣavāku (a primeval king).

4.2 Thus passed from one to another the royal sages and seers knew it. Then with a long lapse of time, Arjuna, the yoga was lost.

4.3 Today that very yoga, that ancient yoga, is by me explained to you. You are beloved to me, and a friend. So this is indeed the highest secret.

Arjuna said:

4.4 Later is your birth, sir; (much) earlier Vivasvān's. How am I to understand that you declared this yoga in the beginning?

Krishna said:

4.5 Many are my part births; yours also, Arjuna. I know them all; you do not.

4.6 Although I exist as the unborn, the imperishable Self and am the Lord of beings, by resorting to and controlling my own nature I come into phenomenal being through my own magical power of self-delimitation.

4.7 Whenever there is a crisis concerning the right way (*dharma*), Arjuna, and a rising up of evil, then I loose myself forth (taking birth).

4.8 For the protection of good people and for the destruction of evil-doers, for the establishment of the right way, I take birth age after age.

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4.14 Actions do not stain me; nor do I have desire for the fruits of works. The person who recognizes me as this way is himself not bound by his works.

4.15 So knowing, ancient seekers of liberation and enlightenment carried out works. Therefore simply do actions as were done of old by them.

4.16 What action is, and what inaction, even seer-sages are confused on this score. To you I will explain that kind of action which when

understood you will be free from all ill.

4.17 For action must be understood, and wrong action as well; inaction must be understood—deep, dark, and dense is the nature of action.

4.18 Were one to see inaction in action and action in inaction, that person among mortals would be wise; he would be spiritually disciplined (or, yoked in yoga) in all his works.

4.19 One whose instigations and undertakings are all free from the motive of personal desire, the wise see that person as the truly learned, him whose karma has been burned up in the fire of knowledge.

4.20 Having abandoned attachment to the fruits of works, constantly satisfied, independent, one does nothing whatsoever even while thoroughly engaged in works.

4.21 Transcending hope and expectation, controlled in heart and mind, with all possessiveness renounced, one doing simply physical actions accrues no (karmic) adversity.

4.22 Satisfied with whatever gain comes, passed beyond oppositions and dualities, untouched by jealousy, equal-minded and balanced in the face of success and failure, such a person though he acts is not bound.

4.23 All karmic dispositions dissolve and wash away when a person is free from attachment, liberated, with a mind firmly fixed in knowledge, acting in a spirit of sacrifice.

4.24 Brahman is the giving, Brahman the oblation; by Brahman into the Brahman-fire it is poured. It is just to Brahman where one goes achieving the ecstatic trance of Brahman-action.

4.25 Some yogins practice sacrifice directed to the gods; others offer the sacrifice by the sacrifice into the fire of Brahman.

4.26 Others offer the sense organs of hearing and so on into the fires of control; still others offer the sense objects of sound and so on into the fires of the senses.

4.27 And others all the actions of the sense organs and the actions of the life-breaths as well into the yogic fire of self-control kindled by knowledge.

4.28 Likewise, some perform material sacrifices, some sacrifices of austerity, and some sacrifices of yoga; there are seekers who with strict vows perform sacrifices of both religious study and knowledge.

4.29 Similarly, some offer the incoming breath into the outgoing breath and the outgoing breath into the incoming; these restraining the courses of the breaths are devoted to the practice of breath-control (*prāṇāyāma*).

4.30 Others controlled in diet offer the breaths into the breaths. All these understand sacrifice, and through sacrifice reduce the stains (of karma).

4.31 Those who eat the nectar of immortality left over from a sacrificial action, they go to the eternal Brahman. This world does not belong to one

who fails to sacrifice, so how could the next, Arjuna?

4.32 In this way, numerous diverse sacrifices are spread wide in the mouth of Brahman. Know them all as born in action. Thus knowing, you will be liberated and enlightened.

4.33 A sacrifice in knowledge, Arjuna, is superior to a sacrifice with material things. All action in its entirety culminates and is fulfilled in knowledge.

4.34 Come to have this knowledge through submission to those who know, by questioning and service; they, the seers of what is real, will initiate and teach you.

4.35 Knowing that, you will not ever be confused again, Arjuna—that whereby you will see beings without exception in the Self and then in Me.

4.36 Even if of all sinners you are now the very worst evil-doer, once in the boat of knowledge you will safely cross over the crookedness of evil.

4.37 As a fire kindled reduces its fuel to ashes, Arjuna, so the fire of knowledge makes ashes all karma.

4.38 For here in this world there is no purifier the equal of knowledge; a person perfected through yoga practice finds it himself in the Self after a time.

4.39 A person of faith obtains that knowledge, concentrated on it, with senses controlled. Having obtained the knowledge, he at once attains to

the supreme peace.

4.40 A person not only not knowing but having no faith, his soul full of doubts, is lost; neither this world nor another, nor happiness, comes to the doubting soul.

4.41 Actions do not bind him who has transcended works through yoga and cut through doubt with knowledge; he is Self-possessed, Arjuna.

4.42 Therefore having cut through the doubt that is born of ignorance and set in the heart, having cut through it with the sword of Self-knowledge, in yoga, Arjuna, take your stand; stand up and fight.³

3. From Chapters Three and Four.

