

BHAGAVAD-GITA



EPISODE FROM THE GITA
Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay

For centuries, the *Bhagavad-Gita* (bug' ə vəd gē' tā), which means "Song of the Lord," has been one of the most important texts in the Hindu tradition. It has been translated more often and into more languages than any other Sanskrit text, and many Hindu religious teachers have written commentaries on it. This ancient Sanskrit book has also played a role in modern politics. During the struggle for his country's independence, the Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi turned to the *Gita* for inspiration almost daily.

Part of the *Mahabharata*

Although it can be read as a self-contained book, the *Bhagavad-Gita* is actually a small part

of India's greatest epic, the *Mahabharata*. This epic is monumentally long, approximately four times the combined length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*! It is a collection of tales that were passed on for many generations by village storytellers. Sometime between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200—scholars cannot provide a more precise date—these tales were woven together into India's most important epic.

The main story of the *Mahabharata* concerns the conflict between two branches of a family, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, over the rights to a kingdom in northern India. After many episodes, these two groups prepare to fight a battle just north of modern-day New Delhi. The entire *Bhagavad-Gita*, which falls in the middle of the epic, takes place on the battlefield prior to the fighting. The story of the battle, like all the eighteen chapters of the *Gita*, is narrated by a character named Sanjay.

Krishna and Arjuna

Arjuna (är' jōn ə), a Pandava, has chosen his brother-in-law Krishna (krish' nə) as his charioteer for the battle. (The role of the charioteer in ancient India was more than that of a driver. He was a trusted adviser to the warrior who owned the chariot.) At this early point in the story, Arjuna knows only that Krishna is a special person. He does not yet realize that Krishna is god. That will be dramatically revealed to him in a later chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

As the poem begins, Arjuna faces a dilemma: He knows it is wrong to kill his cousins and uncles who are on the opposing side, but he also knows that it is his duty to fight. In the first chapter of the *Gita*, he refuses to take part in the battle; dropping his bow, he asks Krishna for advice. We meet this great warrior here in Chapter 2 weeping with frustration and confusion. Krishna, however, bluntly tells him that he must fight.

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

Bhagavad-Gita

Commentary

Nonattached Work. Krishna advises Arjuna to fight, but to fight without concern for the results of his actions. This kind of unworried participation, which Krishna calls **nonattached work**, is one of the main themes of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. In order to appreciate this idea, however, it is necessary to understand the caste system that regulated Indian society and the Indian conception of the Atman, or soul.

Indian society was divided into four main castes. The Brahmins, or priests, were the caste with the greatest prestige. Next, in descending order, came the rulers and warriors, the merchants and farmers, and the peasants and laborers. Lowest of all were the untouchables, who performed the most menial and degrading tasks. (Not only were the untouchables considered the lowest of the low, but they weren't even considered a caste.) Caste identity was determined by birth, but Hindus were expected to marry within their caste. They were also required to perform the duties prescribed by their social position: Brahmins presided over sacrifices, warriors fought, merchants traded, and farmers farmed. In advising Arjuna, Krishna reminds him that he is a member of the warrior caste and therefore obligated to fight.

Krishna also knows that Arjuna is worried about hurting his relatives. He tries to allay this fear by pointing out to Arjuna the difference between the body and the Atman. The body may perish in battle, but the Atman is an eternal and unchangeable soul (the same term is also used to describe the source of all souls). When an individual dies, his or her Atman is reborn into another body. Knowing this to be true, Arjuna should not be concerned about the killing that occurs in battle.

As this account of the caste system and the concept of Atman suggests, Krishna is not asking Arjuna to act carelessly or cruelly. He is not urging him to do what he pleases. On the contrary, he wants him to fulfill his social obligations, but to do so with a knowledge of the Atman and without anxiety about the results of his action. Krishna and the *Gita* teach that every action will ultimately be rewarded or punished. It is impossible, however, for anyone to understand this system of rewards and punishments. Arjuna should therefore do the right thing, set his mind at rest, and not expect an immediate reward.

Writing

Is it possible to act out your role in society without concern for the results of your action? Think about the implications of such an attitude. Then list some of the benefits and disadvantages for society if everyone were to act in this manner.

from the **Bhagavad-Gita**

The Yoga of Knowledge

translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood

SANJAYA: Then his eyes filled with tears, and his heart grieved and was bewildered with pity. And Sri Krishna spoke to him, saying:

SRI KRISHNA: Arjuna, is this hour of battle the time for scruples and fancies? Are they worthy of you, who seek enlightenment? Any brave man who merely hopes for fame or heaven would despise them.

What is this weakness? It is beneath you. Is it for nothing men call you the foe-consumer? Shake off this cowardice, Arjuna. Stand up.

ARJUNA: Bhishma and Drona are noble and ancient, worthy of the deepest reverence. How can I greet them with arrows, in battle? If I kill them, how can I ever enjoy my wealth, or any other pleasure? It will be cursed with blood-guilt. I would much rather spare them, and eat the bread of a beggar.

Which will be worse, to win this war, or to lose it? I scarcely know. Even the sons of Dhritarashtra stand in the enemy ranks. If we kill them, none of us will wish to live.

Is this real compassion that I feel, or only a delusion? My mind gropes about in darkness. I cannot see where my duty lies. Krishna, I beg you, tell me frankly and clearly what I ought to do. I am your disciple. I put myself into your hands. Show me the way.

*Not this world's kingdom,
Supreme, unchallenged,
No, nor the throne*

*Of the gods in heaven,
Could ease this sorrow
That numbs my senses!*

SANJAYA: When Arjuna, the foe-consuming, the never-slothful, had spoken thus to Govinda, ruler of the senses, he added: "I will not fight," and was silent.

Then to him who thus sorrowed between the two armies, the ruler of the senses spoke, smiling:

SRI KRISHNA: Your words are wise, Arjuna, but your sorrow is for nothing. The truly wise mourn neither for the living nor for the dead.

There was never a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be.

Just as the dweller in this body passes through childhood, youth and old age, so at death he merely passes into another kind of body. The wise are not deceived by that.

Feelings of heat and cold, pleasure and pain, are caused by the contact of the senses with their objects. They come and they go, never lasting long. You must accept them.

A serene spirit accepts pleasure and pain with an even mind, and is unmoved by either. He alone is worthy of immortality.

That which is non-existent can never come into being, and that which is can never cease to be. Those who have known the inmost Reality know also the nature of *is* and *is not*.

That Reality which pervades the universe is indestructible. No one has power to change the Changeless.

Bodies are said to die, but That which possesses the body is eternal. It cannot be limited, or destroyed. Therefore you must fight.

*Some say this Atman¹
Is slain, and others
Call It the slayer:
They know nothing.
How can It slay
Or who shall slay It?*

*Know this Atman
Unborn, undying,
Never ceasing,
Never beginning,
Deathless, birthless,
Unchanging forever.
How can It die
The death of the body?*

*Knowing It birthless,
Knowing It deathless,
Knowing It endless,*

1. **Atman** (ät' män): This term, whose literal meaning is "Self," refers to the eternal, unchanging soul in every conscious being.

*Forever unchanging,
Dream not you do
The deed of the killer,
Dream not the power
Is yours to command it.*

*Worn-out garments
Are shed by the body:
Worn-out bodies
Are shed by the dweller
Within the body.
New bodies are donned
By the dweller, like garments.*

*Not wounded by weapons,
Not burned by fire,
Not dried by the wind,
Not wetted by water:
Such is the Atman,
Not dried, not wetted,
Not burned, not wounded,
Innermost element,
Everywhere, always,
Being of beings,
Changeless, eternal,
Forever and ever.*

This Atman cannot be manifested to the senses, or thought about by the mind. It is not subject to modification. Since you know this, you should not grieve.

ARJUNA AND KRISHNA IN THE CHARIOT, BETWEEN THE TWO ARMIES
Illustration from the Bhagavad-Gita



But if you should suppose this Atman to be subject to constant birth and death, even then you ought not to be sorry.

Death is certain for the born. Rebirth is certain for the dead. You should not grieve for what is unavoidable.

Before birth, beings are not manifest to our human senses. In the interim between birth and death, they are manifest. At death they return to the unmanifest again. What is there in all this to grieve over?

There are some who have actually looked upon the Atman, and understood It, in all Its wonder. Others can only speak of It as wonderful beyond their understanding. Others know of Its wonder by hearsay. And there are others who are told about It and do not understand a word.

He Who dwells within all living bodies remains forever indestructible. Therefore, you should never mourn for anyone.

Even if you consider this from the standpoint of your own caste-duty, you ought not to hesitate; for, to a warrior, there is nothing nobler than a righteous war. Happy are the warriors to whom a battle such as this comes: it opens a door to heaven.

But if you refuse to fight this righteous war, you will be turning aside from your duty. You will be a sinner, and disgraced. People will speak ill of you throughout the ages. To a man who values his honor, that is surely worse than death. The warrior-chiefs will believe it was fear that drove you from the battle; you will be despised by those who have admired you so long. Your enemies, also, will slander your courage. They will use the words which should never be spoken. What could be harder to bear than that?

Die, and you win heaven. Conquer, and you enjoy the earth. Stand up now, son of Kunti, and resolve to fight. Realize that pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, are all one and the same: then go into battle. Do this and you cannot commit any sin.

I have explained to you the true nature of the Atman. Now listen to the method of Karma

Yoga.² If you can understand and follow it, you will be able to break the chains of desire which bind you to your actions.

In this yoga, even the abortive attempt is not wasted. Nor can it produce a contrary result. Even a little practice of this yoga will save you from the terrible wheel of rebirth and death.

In this yoga, the will is directed singly toward one ideal. When a man lacks this discrimination, his will wanders in all directions, after innumerable aims. Those who lack discrimination may quote the letter of the scripture, but they are really denying its inner truth. They are full of worldly desires, and hungry for the rewards of heaven. They use beautiful figures of speech. They teach elaborate rituals which are supposed to obtain pleasure and power for those who perform them. But, actually, they understand nothing except the law of Karma,³ that chains men to rebirth.

Those whose discrimination is stolen away by such talk grow deeply attached to pleasure and power. And so they are unable to develop that concentration of the will which leads a man to absorption in God.

The Vedas⁴ teach us about the three gunas⁵ and their functions. You, Arjuna, must overcome the three gunas. You must be free from the pairs of opposites.⁶ Poise your mind in tranquillity. Take care neither to acquire nor to hoard. Be established in the consciousness of the Atman, always.

When the whole country is flooded, the reservoir becomes superfluous. So, to the illumined seer, the Vedas are all superfluous.

You have the right to work, but for the work's sake only. You have no right to the fruits of work. Desire for the fruits of work must never be your motive in working. Never give way to laziness, either.

2. **Karma Yoga:** The path of selfless, God-dedicated action.
3. **the law of Karma:** Hindus believe that everyone is reborn many times and that one's actions in each life determine one's fate in future lives.
4. **Vedas:** Sacred books of the Hindus.
5. **gunas:** Three substances that make up the material universe.
6. **opposites:** The world that seems real is composed of illusory opposites like heat and cold.

Perform every action with your heart fixed on the Supreme Lord. Renounce attachment to the fruits. Be even-tempered in success and failure; for it is this evenness of temper which is meant by yoga.

Work done with anxiety about results is far inferior to work done without such anxiety, in the calm of self-surrender. Seek refuge in the knowledge of Brahman.⁷ They who work selfishly for results are miserable.

In the calm of self-surrender you can free yourself from the bondage of virtue and vice during this very life. Devote yourself, therefore, to reaching union with Brahman. To unite the heart with Brahman and then to act: that is the secret of non-attached work. In the calm of self-surrender, the seers renounce the fruits of their actions, and so reach enlightenment. Then they are free from the bondage of rebirth, and pass to that state which is beyond all evil.

When your intellect has cleared itself of its delusions, you will become indifferent to the results of all action, present or future. At present, your intellect is bewildered by conflicting interpretations of the scriptures. When it can rest, steady and undistracted, in contemplation of the Atman, then you will reach union with the Atman.

ARJUNA: Krishna, how can one identify a man who is firmly established and absorbed in Brahman? In what manner does an illumined soul speak? How does he sit? How does he walk?

SRI KRISHNA:

*He knows bliss in the Atman
And wants nothing else.
Cravings torment the heart:
He renounces cravings.
I call him illumined.
Not shaken by adversity,
Not hankering after happiness:
Free from fear, free from anger,*

7. **Brahman:** The oversoul of which each individual's Atman is a part.

*Free from the things of desire.
I call him a seer, and illumined.
The bonds of his flesh are broken.
He is lucky, and does not rejoice:
He is unlucky, and does not weep.
I call him illumined.*

*The tortoise can draw in his legs:
The seer can draw in his senses.
I call him illumined.*

*The abstinent⁸ run away from what they
desire
But carry their desires with them:
When a man enters Reality,
He leaves his desires behind him.*

*Even a mind that knows the path
Can be dragged from the path:
The senses are so unruly.
But he controls the senses
And recollects the mind
And fixes it on me.
I call him illumined.*

*Thinking about sense-objects
Will attach you to sense-objects;
Grow attached, and you become addicted;
Thwart your addiction, it turns to anger;
Be angry, and you confuse your mind;
Confuse your mind, you forget the lesson of
experience;
Forget experience, you lose discrimination;
Lose discrimination, and you miss life's only
purpose.*

*When he has no lust, no hatred,
A man walks safely among the things of
lust and hatred.
To obey the Atman
Is his peaceful joy:
Sorrow melts
Into that clear peace:
His quiet mind
Is soon established in peace.*

8. **The abstinent** (ab' stə nɒnt): Those who voluntarily do without food, drink, or other pleasures.

The uncontrolled mind
Does not guess that the Atman is present:
How can it meditate?⁹
Without meditation, where is peace?
Without peace, where is happiness?

The wind turns a ship
From its course upon the waters:
The wandering winds of the senses
Cast man's mind adrift
And turn his better judgment from its course.
When a man can still the senses
I call him illumined.
The recollected mind is awake
In the knowledge of the Atman
Which is dark night to the ignorant:
The ignorant are awake in their sense-life

9. **meditate** (med' ə tā't) v: Think deeply and continuously.

Which they think is daylight:
To the seer it is darkness

Water flows continually into the ocean
But the ocean is never disturbed:
Desire flows into the mind of the seer
But he is never disturbed.
The seer knows peace:
The man who stirs up his own lusts
Can never know peace.
He knows peace who has forgotten desire.
He lives without craving:
Free from ego, free from pride.

This is the state of enlightenment in
Brahmāṇa:
A man does not fall back from it
Into delusion.
Even at the moment of death
He is alive in that enlightenment:
Brahman and he are one.

Reader's Response What is your definition
of an enlightened person?

PRIMARY SOURCE

What is life like in India today? The contemporary writer Santha Rama Rau gives us a view of an Indian bazaar. "To me an Indian bazaar is a source of endless delight and excitement. It is usually a series of plain wooden stalls on which are piled, with unconscious artistry, brightly colored, fruits, vegetables, spices, gleaming silver jewelry, brilliant silks and cottons, or charming, grotesque painted wooden toys. The vendors who can't afford a stall sit on the sidewalk outside the market, their baskets stacked behind them, their wives in vivid cotton saris crouch-

ing in the shade, and in front of them are spread carpets of scarlet chilies drying in the sun, small hills of saffron, tumeric, coriander, ginger, cinnamon—all the magical names from the old days of the spice trade with the Indies. With a worn stone mortar and pestle the vendor or his wife will grind your spices for you, blending them according to your particular taste, and weigh them in tiny brass scales strung on twine and balanced delicately in one hand. In all transactions you receive a pleasantly individual attention—nothing standardized."

THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Interpreting

1. Yoga is a Hindu practice by which one seeks union with the universal soul, or Atman, through practices like deep concentration and controlled breathing. Why do you think this selection is entitled "The Yoga of Knowledge"?
2. Krishna says, "When a man enters Reality, / He leaves his desires behind him." Explain what he means by "Reality."
3. Krishna classifies virtue and vice together, although we usually think of them as opposites. Why does he consider them both forms of "bondage"?
4. Why is Krishna's comparison of the "illumined seer" to the tortoise especially apt?
5. A paradox is a statement that seems contradictory. What is paradoxical about Krishna's instilling in Arjuna the urge to "break the chains of desire"?

Applying

6. What would an "illumined seer" find most strange about contemporary American society?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Understanding Nonattached Work

Nonattached work is the performance of one's caste-duty in a spirit of "calm" and "self-surrender." This calmness comes from the insight that the body and the world are unimportant but the Atman, or soul, is eternal. It is therefore unnecessary, and even harmful, to strive for worldly success and rewards.

Krishna teaches these ideas to Arjuna in two ways. Speaking directly, he provides a poetic and philosophical explanation of terms like the Atman: "Not dried by the wind, / Not wetted by water: / Such is the Atman." However, he also explains these ideas indirectly by telling Arjuna how the person who understands them will behave: "Free from fear, free from anger / Free from the things of desire."

1. Which of these two methods of teaching do you think is the more effective? Explain.
2. The title of this chapter is "The Yoga of Knowledge," yet Krishna's purpose is to motivate Arjuna to act.
(a) What do Krishna's words suggest about the

relationship between knowledge and action? (b) Is one more important than the other? Explain.

CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

Appreciating an Idea's Influence

Mahatma Gandhi led the Indian struggle to win independence from the British. Influenced by the teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Gandhi devised a technique which he called the "truth act"—in Sanskrit, the term is *satyagraha* (sut' yə gru' hə). He would perform such an act by publicly and dramatically pointing to some injustice and calling on the authorities to remedy it. By performing such acts, he and his followers risked beating and imprisonment. As Krishna recommends in the *Gita*, however, Gandhi continued to fulfill his duty and disregarded the dangers.

In the late 1950's, Martin Luther King adopted Gandhi's nonviolent method of protest and used the "truth act" in the struggle to win equality for Afro-Americans.

1. Through the Civil Rights movement, an ancient Hindu text has profoundly influenced American society. What lessons does this fact suggest?
2. The *Bhagavad-Gita* teaches that the material world is transitory and unreal. (a) Would belief in the world's unreality make it easier to act without regard for the consequences? Explain. (b) Is this belief essential to the technique of *satyagraha*? Why or why not?

THINKING AND WRITING

Applying an Indian Concept

Krishna advises Arjuna to "Be even-tempered in success and failure." Consider this advice and then write a paper describing the ways in which American society either supports this attitude or conveys an opposite message. Begin by listing people in your own life who would welcome this view or would find it odd. What, for instance, would classmates, coaches, teachers, or parents think of Krishna's advice? As you write, support your generalizations with examples based on your experience. In revising your paper, make sure you have ended with a conclusion that summarizes your opinion.

from the *Bhagavad-Gita* 181