

BHAGAVAD GITA

The *Bhagavad Gita* (*Song of the Blessed Lord*) is Hinduism's most beloved sacred text. The poem appears in its present form as an episode in the *Mahabharata* (*The Great Deeds of the Bharata Clan*), the world's longest epic, which was composed over a period from perhaps 500 B.C. to possibly A.D. 400 but which certainly drew from much earlier Aryan oral traditions. Like the Homeric Greek epics, the *Mahabharata* deals on one level with the clash of armies and the combat of individual heroes, and simultaneously on a higher plane it expounds theological and philosophical insights. Among all these spiritual interjections, the *Bhagavad Gita* is the most profound.

The *Gita's* date of final composition is uncertain; scholars fix it anywhere between 300 B.C. and A.D. 300. What is certain is that Hindu commentators have consistently considered the song to be the last and greatest of the Upanishadic texts, for they see it as the crystallization of all that was expressed and implied in the Upanishadic tradition.

The core question addressed in the *Bhagavad Gita* is how can a person become one with Brahman while still functioning in this world? The answer comes from Lord Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu, the Divine Preserver. In this particular corporeal form, or *avatara*, Krishna/Vishnu serves as charioteer to the warrior-hero Arjuna. Arjuna, a brave soldier, shrinks from entering battle when he realizes that he must fight close relatives. The hero-god Krishna then proceeds to resolve Arjuna's quandary by explaining to him the moral imperative of caste-duty, or dharma.

Practically speaking, this reading demonstrates the way dharma works and supercedes personal emotions, which have no place in Hindu religious thought.

The deity said, you have grieved for those who deserve no grief. . . . Learned men grieve not for the living nor the dead. Never did I not exist, nor you, nor these rulers of men; nor will any one of us ever hereafter cease to be. As in this body, infancy and youth and old age come to the embodied self, so does the acquisition of another body; a sensible man is not deceived about that. The contacts of the senses, O son of Kunti! which produce cold and heat, pleasure and pain, are not permanent, they are ever coming and going. Bear them, O descendant of Bharata! For, O chief of men! that sensible man whom they (pain and pleasure being alike to him) afflict not, he merits immortality. There is no existence for that which is unreal; there is no non-existence for that which is real. And the correct conclusion about both is perceived by those who perceive the truth. Know that to be indestructible which pervades all this . . . He who thinks it¹ to be the killer and he who thinks it to be killed, both know nothing. It kills not, is not killed. It is not born, nor does it ever die, nor, having existed, does it exist no more. Unborn, everlasting, unchangeable, and primeval it is not killed when the body is killed. O son of Pritha! how can that man who knows it thus to be indestructible, everlasting, unborn, and inexhaustible, how and whom can he kill, whom can he cause to be killed? As a man, casting off old clothes, puts on others and new ones, so the embodied self casting off old bodies, goes to others and new ones . . . It is everlasting, all-pervading, stable, firm, and eternal. It is said to be unperceived, to be unthinkable, to be unchangeable. Therefore knowing it to be such, you ought not to grieve. But even if you think that it is constantly born, and constantly dies, still, O you of mighty arms! you ought not to grieve thus. For to one that is born, death is certain; and to one that dies, birth is certain . . . This embodied self, O descendant of Bharata! within every one's body is ever indestructible. Therefore you ought not to grieve for any being. Having regard to your own duty also, you ought not to falter, for there is nothing better for a Kshatriya² than a righteous battle. Happy those Kshatriyas, O son of Pritha! who can find such a battle . . . an open door to heaven! But if you will not fight this righteous battle, then you will have abandoned your own duty and your fame, and you will incur sin . . . Your business is with action alone; not by any means with fruit. Let not the fruit of action be your motive to action. Let not your attachment be fixed on inaction. Having recourse to devotion . . . perform actions, casting off all attachment, and being equable in success or ill-success; such equability is called devotion. . . . The wise who have obtained devotion cast off the fruit of action,³ and released from the shackles of repeated births, repair to that seat where there is no unhappiness. . . . The man who, casting off all desires, lives free

from attachments, who is free from egoism, and from the feeling that this or that is mine, obtains tranquility. This, O son of Pritha! is the Brahmic state; attaining to this, one is never deluded; and remaining in it in one's last moments, one attains the Brahmic bliss.⁴ . . .

I have passed through many births, O Arjuna! and you also. I know them all, but you, O terror of your foes! do not know them. Even though I am unborn and inexhaustible in my essence, even though I am lord of all beings, still I am born by means of my delusive power. Whensoever, O descendant of Bharata! piety languishes, and impiety is in the ascendant, I create myself. I am born age after age, for the protection of the good, for the destruction of evil-doers, and the establishment of piety. . . . The fourfold division of castes was created by me according to the appointment of qualities and duties. . . . The duties of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaisyas, and of Sudras, too, O terror of your foes! are distinguished according to the qualities born of nature.⁵ Tranquility, restraint of the senses, penance, purity, forgiveness, straightforwardness, also knowledge, experience, and belief in a future world, this is the natural duty of Brahmins. Valor, glory, courage, dexterity, not slinking away from battle, gifts, exercise of lordly power, this is the natural duty of Kshatriyas. Agriculture, tending cattle, trade, this is the natural duty of Vaisyas. And the natural duty of Sudras, too, consists in service. Every man intent on his own respective duties obtains perfection. Listen, now, how one intent on one's own duty obtains perfection. Worshipping, by the performance of his own duty, him from whom all things proceed, and by whom all this is permeated, a man obtains perfection. One's duty, though defective, is better than another's duty well performed. Performing the duty prescribed by nature, one does not incur sin. O son of Kunti! one should not abandon a natural duty though tainted with evil; for all actions are enveloped by evil, as fire by smoke. One who is self-restrained, whose understanding is unattached everywhere, from whom affections have departed, obtains the supreme perfection of freedom from action by renunciation. Learn from me, only in brief, O son of Kunti! how one who has obtained perfection attains the Brahman, which is the highest culmination of knowledge. A man possessed of a pure understanding, controlling his self by courage, discarding sound and other objects of sense, casting off affection and aversion; who frequents clean places, who eats little, whose speech, body, and mind are restrained, who is always intent on meditation and mental abstraction, and has recourse to unconcern, who abandoning egoism, stubbornness, arrogance, desire, anger, and all belongings, has no thought that this or that is mine, and who is tranquil, becomes fit for assimilation with the Brahman.

FOOTNOTES

1. The atman, or individual soul, and Brahman, which are one and the same.
2. A member of the ruling warrior caste.
3. Do not concern themselves with the earthly consequences of their actions and develop no attachments to the corporeal rewards (fame, wealth, children) which might result from those actions.
4. Brahma-nirvana, or merging with Brahman and release from the cycle of rebirth.
5. Each caste consists of persons born to that station by virtue of their nature. Each person's karma has made that person's nature suitable for a particular caste.

Questions for the Bhagavad Gita:

- 1) Why should Arjuna not grieve for those whom he might kill?
- 2) According to Krishna, how "real" is the secular (non-religious) world? (Keep in mind who Krishna is and what he is trying to tell Arjuna)
- 3) Why should one perform one's caste-duty (dharma) in a stoic (unemotional) fashion?
- 4) According to Krishna, what constitutes sin? What is evil?
- 5) What hope, if any, does Krishna's theological message hold for the lowest elements of Hindu society? (In other words, does Krishna's message to Arjuna give hope to people of lower castes? Explain.)
- 6) Is there anything that you do, any rules or behaviors that you follow, because you are "just supposed to?" Explain.