

Bhagavad-gita overview

The gita deals with three main areas of theology—sambanda, abhideya, and priyojana—or knowledge, application, and the goal. First, in the gita's beginning chapter, we are presented with the circumstances that lead Arjuna to an interest in spiritual philosophy. There is conflict that has led to a war that will surely cause great suffering and death, as well as the possible happiness of having his older brother reinstated as world emperor.

While most of us aren't in a literal war for all or even part of our lives, life is a mixture of some degree of happiness and distress, or the potential for either or both. We desire unending happiness, knowledge, and life full of health and vitality. Yet the only promise our earthly existence gives us is that all will be temporary, including our very bodies. We are almost surely assured of encountering hardship to acquire our happiness and keep it, while we know that we will definitely lose it.

So, like Arjuna we may seek to tip the scales towards happiness by working according to scriptural moral codes and deciding to avoid difficult or superficially immoral activities, without understanding the true cause of our difficulty and the path to freedom. Arjuna gives four arguments against fighting: compassion, enjoyment, sin, and family destruction. He says that killing would mean a lack of the good quality of compassion. He sees no enjoyment in winning the battle, as the victory and kingdom will come at the loss of family members at his hands. Killing superiors and relatives, even if they are aggressors, is sinful. And, when the family is destroyed through the deaths of so many of the male members, society as a whole will be corrupted. As Arjuna concludes his moral and scriptural arguments, deciding not to fight, he also makes a pivotal decision to accept Krishna as his spiritual guide, guru. Just as we accept teachers to guide us to a happier life through education, so for spiritual guidance one must also accept a teacher.

Krishna's first statement in the role of teacher—generally His relationship with Arjuna is one of friend—is that Arjuna's words may be intelligent, but his conclusions are not those of wise men. The second chapter is of sambanda, called sankhya (literally "counting") and begins with the most essential tenet of faith and understanding—we are a soul inhabiting a temporary body and moving, both in this life and from life to life, from one body to another. In explaining this principle, Krishna deals with Arjuna's argument of compassion (2.10-30), saying that real compassion is for the real person, who may be benefited by a change in body, as much as a person may be benefited by a new set of clothes. The nature of the soul, describes primarily as a negation of material qualities, is described in some detail. In addition to addressing the point of compassion, Krishna also relates the point of our real identity to the fact that we have to tolerate duties that are difficult from the bodily or mental point of view if we want to come to real happiness of the self.

Anticipating opposing arguments, Krishna states that even if one does not accept the fact that we are a spiritual soul, still bodily compassion is not an ultimate understanding. If we

are the body, which is simply chemicals, then what is the loss if those chemicals are destroyed? He then strongly again asserts the existence of the self, further describing its qualities.

Krishna then counters Arjuna's argument about enjoyment. First, He gives a material point that there will be more happiness in fighting than in avoiding it. As a warrior prince, it's Arjuna's duty to defend the kingdom against evil usurpers. If he wins, he gains a kingdom and if he dies he achieves heaven. Having made such an argument, Krishna concludes that Arjuna shouldn't base his decision on material happiness, but rather on a higher standard of enjoyment that comes from doing one's duty for purification. Within the same argument, there's the answer to Arjuna's point about incurring sin for fighting with his elders. Krishna says (2.33) that Arjuna's duty is to fight; **not** doing so under the circumstances would be sinful.

Krishna then describes buddhi-yoga, or uniting with the Supreme with intelligence. He explains that acting with intelligence brings eternally good benefits and freedom from sin and its reaction, whereas those who lack this yoga are interested in the Vedas' material fruits. Arjuna asks how we could describe such a person in buddhi-yoga—general symptoms, speech, how he or she exercises self-controls, and how he or she acts. Krishna responds that, while the attitude and behavior of such a person might resemble that of ordinary people, the difference is like night and day. A self-realized person gives up all desire for material good and bad because he or she is satisfied with his or her internal spiritual nature, which is a greater pleasure.

Arjuna, however, was confused. It appeared that Krishna was advocating both a path of detached, contemplative existence and also urging him to fight a war. Krishna explained that there is essentially no difference between the contemplative life of sankhya yoga and the active life of karma yoga. However, sankhya isn't as complete as karma-yoga which uses the senses in dutiful work. He begins to explain action, abhedaya. Work done for Vishnu **is** sacrifice. One should at least perform ritualistic sacrifices, because all sacrifice not only brings material prosperity but also purifies the performer of selfishness and desires for material enjoyment. Even spiritually advanced people—even Krishna, who is God Himself—does the sacrificial work of scripturally prescribed duties to set an example. Here Krishna addresses Arjuna's argument about ruining society and producing unwanted children. He says that avoiding one's duty will bring such results.

Krishna further explains that most people cannot follow an example of renunciation without their actions being artificial and leading them to sin. Therefore, people should be told to work in devotion rather than stop working. The reason that people generally give up duty is not for spiritual advancement but due to lust. We conquer this lust by controlling our mind and senses according to religious instructions.

To work with knowledge (buddhi), Krishna gives Arjuna the most important knowledge. Here is a further understanding of action—intelligent action. He explains how He taught this science millions of years ago, and, being God, has an eternal form that can remember that incarnation. He explains the line of teachers that are meant to keep this knowledge

alive on earth. After briefly explaining Himself and the history of what He is teaching, Krishna recommends working for Him without material attachment, though He will reciprocate with all who come to Him. In fact, He has created the varnasrama social system to facilitate everyone's gradual elevation.

There's pious action, sinful action, and transcendent action that has no material reaction. Transcendent action occurs when the actor, the action, and the result, are all offered to the Supreme, many examples of which are cited. Sacrifice has to be done with knowledge, however, which requires a teacher—a guru—to give one the understanding of God and what type of sacrificial work is best for the individual. A faithful person who acts with such knowledge will not have sin overtake him.

Arjuna is confused, however, with Krishna's use of the terms "yoga-sannyasta;" renunciation of work, "na karmani;" don't do work, "jnanasina;" destroy your doubts with knowledge, and then "get up and fight." These instructions seem contradictory. Krishna then explains that karma-yoga (working in devotion) and sannyasa (renouncing work) are both good and lead to liberation, but it is better to engage the active senses, understanding that one's not the ultimate doer of actions, and giving the fruits of his actions to Krishna. One works for self-purification rather than for material results. Krishna is integrating karma (action) and jnana (knowledge).

One can work in this way by knowing that oneself is different from the body, and the Lord, although neutral, is truly the ultimate doer through material nature. If one works in this way, he or she sees all living beings equally, does not have sensual things affect him or her, and has spiritual pleasure within. He or she has peace knowing that the Lord is the controller and enjoyer of everything, and the real friend.

Krishna does describe that one advanced in yoga can give up material work itself, not only the fruits, and describes a system of meditation where one lives alone as a celibate, focusing the mind on the Lord within the heart. Such meditation requires complete control of the mind, and will bring the equality of vision and inner peace and happiness previously described for the karma-yogi.

Arjuna doubts that such determination and control is possible for most people, and wonders if one who gives up material life to attempt such yoga, but fails, loses in both material and spiritual life. Krishna responds that any progress in yoga stays from life to life and describes the auspicious births of fallen yogis. He glorifies yoga over all types of ways of living, and stresses that the best among the yogis is one who is always loving Him in full faith. Krishna thus concludes His analysis of yoga as a combination of action and knowledge.

To meditate on the Lord with faith requires knowledge of Him. Krishna therefore explains sambanda, or philosophy, more in depth, concentrating on theological philosophy. He explains that there are three primary energies—God, matter, and the living beings (souls). Krishna is the origin of matter and life, without any origin of

Himself. Krishna then gives a list of how He is the essence and cause of all things, but is the origin of the modes of nature that produce these things.

Krishna explains that many people, under the control of nature's modes, do not know His real position. Such people may be foolish without thinking of philosophy or religion, have a primitive idea of religion, study philosophy and religion in such a way as to deny God, or be openly atheistic. On the other hand, if a pious person needs money, feels distress, is curious or is enlightened with knowledge, he or she will certainly give him or herself to Krishna.

And there are those who neither reject theology nor turn to the Lord, but who worship in another way. Krishna describes such demigod worship, or the worship of many "gods" for various material desires. He characterizes these worshippers as less intelligent because they want something temporary and limited, whereas He can give them eternal and unlimited happiness. The demigods have the power to give benedictions only from Krishna anyway, as a government official can give licenses and so on only by the government's power and authority.

Some worship the Lord as the impersonal Brahman, which is not material. They may offend Krishna, however, thinking that His form is a temporary material manifestation.

Why do some worship demigods and Brahman instead of the Supreme Deity? The Lord doesn't reveal Himself to everyone, as they are born into the delusion of desire and hatred. If a person gives up such contamination through freedom from sin, or even if he just wants to be free of old age and death, he may indeed come to know the Lord, even when he dies.

Arjuna then asks for clarification of several terms Krishna used, and a further explanation of death. After briefly defining those terms, Krishna explains that our thoughts at death determine our next body. Later, He will also explain how our actions in this life affect to what type of body we will transmigrate. In any case, the perfect situation at death is to remember God, which is most likely if one has spent one's whole life in such remembrance. Krishna then describes in what way one can think of Him, and briefly mentions sat-chakra yoga, which is similar to the meditative yoga He previously explained. He asserts, though, that remembering Him through love, bhakti, is easier and more effective than these other types of yoga.

When one remembers Krishna at death, he or she doesn't take another material body in the cycle of transmigration, samsara, but goes to Krishna's own spiritual kingdom, self-luminous and indestructible. This is prayojana, the goal. There is a lesser transcendent sphere, the place of the pervasive Brahman that one can achieve if he or she dies at times of light; one who dies in times of darkness can at most take a material body on a material heavenly planet. But those who are in bhakti-yoga, remembering Krishna through love, will reach His kingdom at death whether they die in times of light or darkness. Such practice of bhakti yoga gives the results of all other types of life.

Having answered Arjuna's questions, Krishna returns to, and to some extent repeats, His earlier points, while further explaining action in bhakti-yoga. This action is differentiated from karma-yoga primarily by the type and degree of the consciousness and motive of the performer. Again, Krishna gives knowledge of Himself upon which one can meditate. He terms this knowledge confidential, and, while it can be perceived directly, only one with faith will understand it.

Krishna gives extraordinary statements—everything is within Him, yet He's not there. He then says that everything does **not** rest in Him. This apparently contradictory philosophy, the incarnation and saint Caitanya Mahaprabhu termed, "acintya bedabeda tattva." This means that simultaneously God is and is not everything and everywhere and everything simultaneously is and is not God. Such an understanding is termed "acintya" meaning it can be described but not fully understood with a human mind. In Western theological terms, one would say that God is both fully and completely immanent and transcendent.

Krishna describes this immanence and transcendence in some detail, showing His relationship to the souls and this world. He creates, both as the efficient cause and as the ingredient cause. (An analogy would be that someone cooks a meal and is also the ingredients that make up the meal). Everything is under His control, yet the good and bad that living beings experience is a result of their free will for which He's not responsible.

Despite Krishna's supreme position, there are those who think He's an ordinary person, while great souls (mahatmas) always serve Him. And then there are those who serve something else—some universal or impersonal idea of God, or lesser beings. All these indirect forms of worship bring temporary results and the worshippers must repeatedly take birth, whereas even imperfect worshippers of God eventually become perfect by His grace. Different types of worship, with different objects of worship, will bring different results. All paths do **not** lead to the same goal, anymore than all cars on a highway will stop at the same destination.

Besides having the best goal, those in bhakti-yoga who worship God also have a simple and joyful process. They can achieve perfection simply giving Krishna an offering of fruit and water. A vegetarian diet is implied herein. Previously, when describing sacrifice in general, Krishna had given the example that only food offered in sacrifice frees the eater from sin. Here He describes the best object of sacrifice—Himself, and the best food to offer—vegetarian. One should also offer Krishna the fruit of whatever his work is. The Sanskrit verse that describes this process is almost identical to a verse in Corinthians in the New Testament.

As one might think Krishna an ordinary person who is hungry for fruit and leaves, He again states His supreme position, asserting that He is the origin of even the sages and gods, only understood by His grace through devotion. He then speaks what many commentators consider the four essential verses of the gita. He is the origin of all, great souls worship Him with devotion and great satisfaction, and He reciprocates by giving them understanding and knowledge in their hearts, destroying all impediments.

Arjuna says that all great Vedic authorities accept these facts of Krishna's identity as the Supreme Lord. He wants to enjoy hearing more about Krishna's glories.

Whereas previously Krishna explained how one can meditate on Him as the essence and cause of everything, He now describes His qualities **in** the world. He gives a list of the best or most powerful examples of different groups, and asserts that such represent Him, although the sum total of material creation is only a spark of His splendor.

Happily Arjuna says that his illusion is destroyed. He has enjoyed hearing how Krishna is represented in the world; now he wants to see it. He wants to see God **as** the world. But, having the rasa of intimate friendship with God, his vision is not one of the Lord's majesty. So Krishna gives Arjuna the divine eyes to see the majestic form of the Lord as the material universe—the universal form.

Perhaps this section is the most famous of the gita. When the gita is portrayed in film or theatre, this flashy and dramatic spiritual vision generally receives more time and attention than the discussion of philosophy and action. Yet, from the point of view of the gita itself, the universal form is a temporary display and not the Lord's original form to whom we should give our love and devotion. In fact, it is difficult to love the universal form, and Arjuna finds himself filled with fear, as the form moves from being a display of all time and space in one place and moment to being kala-rupa, the form of Time itself, total destruction.

Arjuna offers prayers of glorification, begs forgiveness for his intimacy with one he now understands to be the Supreme God, and finally asks to see Krishna's form as Narayana. Krishna manifests Narayana, and then returns to His original form, telling Arjuna that nothing besides devotion and His grace can reveal this original and most pleasing form of God.

Arjuna then wants clarification as to whether it is better to worship Krishna in His original, human-like form, as the universal form, or in some impersonal way. Here's a clear statement that an impersonal understanding will only bring one to perfection after much trouble. There are two aspects to that trouble. The first is that impersonal practices require the stopping of all activities, thoughts, desires, and feelings. But, as the origin of these, perverted as they may be through the body and mind, is the soul, such repression is artificial and therefore very difficult. The second is that one who is successful then has to develop spiritual activities, thoughts, desires, and feelings, but may be afraid to do so, or may find himself or herself so hardened that it is a great struggle.

Krishna then gives practical advice for those with different degrees of commitment. One should always think of Him with love. Unable to do that, one can practice thinking of Him through the process of bhakti-yoga. Unable to do that, one can do some work to serve Him. If a person is unable or unwilling to do even that, Krishna suggests material renunciation, charity, and study, to eventually bring one to the point of bhakti.

There are wonderful qualities of a person who is advanced in bhakti-yoga—equipoised, free from envy, and unaffected by the material world. One who possesses these qualities is dear to Krishna. Indeed, all admire such saintly attributes.

Krishna has thoroughly described the self, God, and the processes of yoga to attain Him. He's also described the goal and its symptoms. But His analysis of matter has been only sketchy. Arjuna then asks for a more detailed understanding of matter, spirit, and knowledge. Although Krishna's description of matter and its relation to the soul and God are among the most complete of any of the world's theological philosophies, here it is a summary only. More complete analyses are there in the *Bhagavat Purana* and other sacred texts.

Referring to these texts, and thus establishing the etiquette that one should cite scripture, Krishna says that our bodies are like a field, we the soul like the tenant, and the Lord like the owner. Knowledge is not a body of information exactly, but good qualities such as humility, cleanliness, and fearlessness. What should be known are the soul, God, and nature.

What one calls “good” or “bad” in a material sense are the ever changing forms of matter. Having a desire to enjoy this matter, the soul forms a bond with the body, and identifies with it. Such identification is the cause of happiness and unhappiness. God, the Supreme Spirit, never falsely identifies with this world and is therefore unaffected. The tiny soul can also have this detachment, knowing that he or she never really mixes with matter. Such a realized soul sees God in everything.

Besides the analogy of the field, one can understand matter as the mother, the souls encased in bodies as the children, and God as the father who puts the eternal, beginningless souls in the body of the mother. What binds a soul who wants material enjoyment to the world of matter? The modes, (or ropes) gunas, of sattva (goodness or truth), rajas (passion), and tamas (ignorance).

These modes are explained as the ultimate material laws that govern all action and existence within the universe. Goodness gives one happiness and knowledge, passion gives desires and hankering, and ignorance madness, laziness and sleep. There are symptoms of each of these modes, and one transmigrates into a new body at death depending on how the modes are affecting him.

To stop the cycle of transmigration one must be free from the modes' influence, the symptom of which will be detachment and neutrality. One achieves such freedom through devotion to Krishna, which first gives Brahman understanding, and then realization of Krishna.

It appears difficult to escape the modes, however, for this material creation appears like a banyan tree with hundreds of roots going both up and down. Further, the “tree” appears upside down as it is a reflection of the reality of God's kingdom. In other words, whatever exists here has some pure and spiritual counterpart, in some way, in the spiritual

world. One needs to cut his or her attachment to the material tree with knowledge and detachment, surrendering to the Lord.

We belong with Him in His spiritual kingdom but are now within a body, struggling with our senses and moving from one body to another in life after life, impelled by the mind. If one purifies the mind with yoga, one can perceive this process of transmigration.

When one is caught in the complicated upside-down material tree, it is difficult to know about Krishna in order to surrender to Him. Therefore He explains Himself in a way easily understood—as the light of the sun and moon, digestive fire, ability to think and remember, and the transcendent knowledge of the sacred texts. Summarizing Vedanta in three verses, Krishna states that there are fallible and infallible beings, but He is above them as the Supreme Person. Knowing this, one serves Him with love.

Twice Krishna has briefly listed those who do and do not turn to Him. He now gives a detailed description of both, particularly the demonic who only aspire to function in the world of matter. The main delineating principles are whether a living being wants to serve himself or serve God, and whether or not one follows scriptural rules. Analogously, a good citizen is willing to sacrifice his desires for the good of the country, and follows the laws.

Arjuna then wonders about people who have some type of religion and faith that is not sanctioned in the Vedas. Krishna explains that all types of faith, food, sacrifice, austerity, and charity can be understood to be in goodness, passion or ignorance. The essence of faith in goodness is a dutiful desire to please God—summarized in the mantra “om tat sat.” Each individual’s expression of religion and faith can be understood to be within one of these modes or, in some cases, on the platform of spiritual transcendence. Generally, most of the world’s religions have practitioners in all these categories. The religious teaching and practice itself promotes transcendence, or at least goodness, but the followers often distort that practice through the modes that govern them. Some so-called religious systems, such as worship of ghosts and evil spirits, are in ignorance by nature, and one cannot achieve even goodness within them. A type of faith that is not at least in goodness is not ultimately useful for the adherent.

Finally, Krishna summarizes His entire instruction. In response to Arjuna’s question about renunciation, He discusses karma-yoga and renunciation in the modes of nature. He again concludes that work should be done as a sacrifice, not abandoned. Summarizing and expanding on His previous description of matter, He gives five factors of action, and explains knowledge, action, the performer of action, and the happiness one can achieve, in each of the modes.

One can be purified through karma-yoga by doing one’s work to please the Lord. There’s a brief description of the qualities and work of four broad categories of people, each of which can be perfect through dedication of work to Krishna. One can be purified through jnana-yoga by detachment and austerities. And one can be purified through bhakti-yoga by doing everything for Krishna.

Arjuna is warned that if he doesn't fight for Krishna, he will fight anyway, as that is his nature. If he accepts Krishna's direction, however, Krishna will protect and guide Him. Then Krishna asks Arjuna to think over everything carefully, making his own decision. The Lord doesn't interfere with the souls' free will to accept or reject loving service. Yet, out of compassion, after telling Arjuna to decide, Krishna again entreats him to simply think of Him, worship Him, and devote himself. Indeed, he should consider such complete surrender his real and only duty, giving up subordinate duties if they are in conflict. The Lord Himself will protect Arjuna if he thus surrenders.

Krishna praises one who studies the conversation and says that those who teach it to the faithful are most glorious. Arjuna decides to accept Krishna's direction. And Sanjaya, who is relating the dialogue to the king whose armies oppose Arjuna, states that with Krishna and His devotee will come victory, opulence, extraordinary power, and morality.