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## The Bhagavad Gita

### **Historical Background and Setting**

According to most historians The Gita is part of the Indian epic known as The Mahabharata. Vyasa has been named as author of both pieces, but some scholars believe the Gita was a separate piece of work more like an Upanishad ( e.g. Eknath Eswaran) The battle portrayed in the Gita has been placed in history some time between 1000 -300 BC.

*Historians surmise that like the Iliad, the Mahabhrata might well be based on real events, culminating in a war that took place somewhere between 1000 and 700 BC -- close, that is to the very dawn of recorded Indian history.*

*B.G. Eknath Eswaran page 3*

### Chapter one

The story is told to Dhritarashtra, the king of the Kurus family. He has been blind from birth and has never been crowned king but serves as the ruler. The entire Bhagavad Gita is narrated by Sanjaya to the blind ruler.

The Kauravas (sons of Kuru) have unlimited troops and are commanded by Bhishma. While the opposition, the Pandavas' ( sons of Pandu) army is small and commanded by Bhima. (verses 10 & 11) However, both sides are descendants of the Kuru family.

The blind ruler, Dhritarashtra, is being challenged for the throne by Yudhishtira, Arjuna's brother and, arguably the rightful heir to the throne.

Arjuna is a warrior and archer of high repute, he is supporting his brother's claim to the throne with the rest of the Pandavas, he is the hero of the Gita.

Sanjaya tells how Arjuna and his charioteer, Sri Krishna, were standing in a mighty chariot yoked with white horses in the midst of two armies ready for battle; all blowing conchs and cowhorns and pounding on drums.



Arjuna asks Sri Krishna to drive the chariot between the two armies so that he can see who will be fighting in the battle. Krishna then says to Arjuna, "Behold all the Kurus gathered together." This is the point where Arjuna realises that on both sides stand fathers and grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons and grandsons, in-laws and friends of the same family. Despairingly he says:

*28) O Krishna, I see my own relations here anxious to fight, my limbs grow*

*weak; 29) my mouth is dry, my body shakes, and my hair is standing on end.*

*30) My skin burns, and the bow Gandiva has slipped from my hand. I am unable to stand; my mind seems to be whirling.*

*B.G. Chapter one*

From this point onwards the Gita follows the wisdom and advice given by Sri Krishna to Arjuna.

The question of why the Gita was set on the battle field has been debated for millennia. Bhagavad Gita means song of God and it would, on the face of it, appear to be an inappropriate setting to learn about yoga and God.

Although historians generally agree that the Battle of the Kurus actually did take place, the message portrayed in the Gita is symbolic of the struggle within. The eternal divine spark in all of us (atman) struggles to be remembered; as the ego (jiva) struggles not be forgotten. Arjuna is the individual consciousness or jiva struggling against the attachments and desires of the world , the chariot is the physical body, Krishna, the driver of the chariot, is the eternal divine spark which lives in all our hearts, the Atman, the awakened Self.



*It is very important to realise that the true meaning of the Gita is only made apparent when it's story and setting is seen as symbolic.*

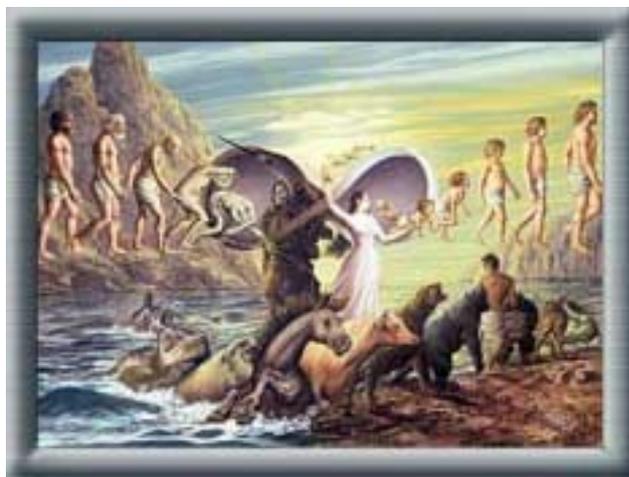
*Derek Thorne*

Is this true? Perhaps the setting was chosen to expose our greatest attachments and misconceptions ---

- ॐ The belief that we are our bodies.
- ॐ The belief that our families and friends are their bodies.
- ॐ The belief that we as human beings could ever cause harm to another
- ॐ The belief that we could possibly harm ourSelves.

All of these misconceptions are dealt with in the Gita's second chapter.

*He overcomes Arjuna's disinclination to fight by analysing the idea of Self, and showing that the man is in error, who thinks that he is doing this, that and the other. When it is*



*found that what he calls "I" is a sort of fiction, created by his own ignorance, a great part of the difficulty has ceased to exist.*

T. Subba Row

*"What exists cannot be destroyed. What can be destroyed does not truly exist [16]. The soul cannot be destroyed [17], but the body in which the soul resides is sure to end [18]. No one can die [19]. The soul is ever-existent, only the body can die [20-21]. Death is simply a change of body, like a change of clothes [22].*

*"No weapon can harm the immovable soul [23-24]." Krishna asks Arjun to consider these facts and not let the grief of death dissuade him from his duty.[25]*

Krishna then tells Arjuna that it is his dharma ( law, duty; the universal law which holds all life together in unity) to fight and he should not waver. In verse 39 Krishna urges Arjuna to listen to the principles of yoga " By practising these you can break through the bonds of karma. On this path effort never goes to waste, and there is no failure. Even a little effort towards spiritual awareness will protect you from the greatest fear."

To me this means that the inner struggle is far more important than anything outside in the physical. If we have total faith that everything in the universe is happening as it should, the challenge is to acknowledge our place in the

universe; "know thyself", our own dharma --- and live it with detachment and awareness. The arrogance of human ego to suppose that any action is not already known by God. In fact, it has already happened.

*Chapter 7 25) The world, deluded does not know I am without birth and changeless. I know everything about the past, present and future, Arjuna: but there is no one who knows me completely. Chapter 11, 32) I am the destroyer of all; I have come to consume your world. Even without your participation, all the warriors gathered here will die. 33) Therefore arise, Arjuna; conquer your enemies and enjoy the glory of sovereignty. I have already slain all these warriors; you will only be my instrument.*

Human reaction to death is usually fear and repulsion, this can be seen everywhere.

Every "disaster" is "news" a drama to be lamented. Why? Some of these deaths are far less traumatic than old age and chronic illness. Our faith is tested and tried every day it is not always easy to see sense in our earthly existence.

The parent who's child is abducted, tortured and killed needs an explanation other than "it is all part of the growing karmic process of the human life experience". A devil doing the bad and a god doing the good helps some make sense of loss. Dyeing on the battle field, for some was, and still is, a good death. In past cultures the warrior was a noble being, sacrificing personal safety for others.

*Chapter 2*

*49) Seek refuge in the attitude of detachment and you will amass the wealth*

*of spiritual awareness. Those who are motivated only by desire for the fruits of their action are miserable, for they are constantly anxious about the results of what they do. 50) When consciousness is unified, however, all vein anxiety is left behind. There is no cause for worry, whether things go well or ill. Therefore, devote yourself to the disciplines of yoga, for Yoga is skill in action.*

#### Chapter 6 B.G. "Holy indifference"

*7) The supreme reality stands revealed in the consciousness of those who have conquered themselves. They live in peace, alike in cold and heat, pleasure and pain, praise and blame. 8) They are completely fulfilled by spiritual wisdom and Self-realisation. To such people a clod of earth, a stone, and gold are the same. 9) They are equally disposed to family, enemies, and friends, to those who support them and those who are hostile, to the good and the evil alike. Because they are impartial they arise to great heights*

When we can accept our place in the universe, when we know our true Self and continue through life observing but not doing, with our attention in God, then life becomes totally selfless, egoless. For Arjuna to think that one course of action was good and another bad means that he was living in, and attached to the physical. However, it cannot be ignored that, as humans, we are attached to the physical and, causing another's body pain and injury will cause us pain and injury.

#### *Toa Te Ching Chapter 31*

*Weapons are the tools of fear; a decent man will avoid them except in the direst necessity and, if compelled, will use them only with the utmost restraint. Peace is the highest value. If the peace has been shattered how*

*can he be content? His enemies are not demons, but human beings like himself. He doesn't wish them personal harm. Nor does he rejoice in victory. how could he rejoice in victory and delight in the slaughter of men? He enters a battle gravely, with sorrow and with great compassion, as if he were attending a funeral .*

Attachment to our bodies seems to bring more suffering than any other attachment. When we thank God for death in the same way we thank God for birth then we know we are no longer gripped by Maya.

## **Summary of the main paths of Yoga**

### **Karma Yoga**

Karma Yoga is selfless service; the way of action. In the third chapter Krishna introduces Arjuna to the concept of detachment; of working for the process and not the results of the work.

*15) Every selfless act, Arjuna, is born from Brahman, the eternal, infinite Godhead. 17) Those who realise the Self are always satisfied. Having found the source of joy and fulfilment, they no longer seek happiness from the external world. They have nothing to gain or lose by any action; neither people or things can affect their security. 19) Strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world; by devotion to selfless work one attains the supreme goal of life.*

Once again we are reminded that; we have nothing to gain or lose, by any action, if we have reached spiritual awareness of the Self, and mastered our senses. Selfless service can be interpreted in many ways. If we look at the way people care for others;

Mother Teresa selflessly worked for the street people of Calcutta. In a T.V.

interview in the 1970's she was asked why, now that she was so famous and influential, she did not tackle the causes of the poverty and homelessness instead of just accepting the status quo. She replied that that was someone else's role, she had her role, serving God.

Other people see selfless service as giving everything all the time and never asking for anything in return. People can sometimes take this to the extreme to the point that they are physically, emotionally and financially abused because they have not set boundaries and they do not care for themselves. If an individual has love, respect, tolerance and acceptance of themselves then they have these qualities to share with others. We cannot share with others something that we do not have ourselves.

Enabling is caring with wisdom. Using respect and love to foster independence and self reliance is part of selfless service to others. Helping another by taking over and "doing for" is disabling and creating a dependence that satisfies the carer's selfish desire to be needed, or to be gone from there quickly. This is not selfless service although it may appear so on the surface.

*As person acts, so he becomes in life. Those who do harm become bad. Good deeds make one pure; bad deeds make one impure. So we are said to be what our desire is. As our desire is, so is our will. As our will is, so are our acts. As we act, so we become.*

*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.*

Giving time, energy, expertise, love, compassion, physical, financial, emotional (the list is long) help is all part of Karma Yoga; All selfless action is really service to God. Karma Yoga is working for God

In Chapter 3 of the Gita Krishna says:

*29) Those who are deluded by the gunas become attached to the results of their actions. Those who understand these truths should not unsettle the ignorant. Performing all actions for my sake, completely absorbed in the self, and without expectations, fight! - but stay free from the fever of the ego.*

## **Jnana Yoga**

The Yoga of Knowledge. The Yoga of self inquiry.

Book four -- Krishna educates Arjuna

5) Many times I have been born, and many times you have, also. All these lives I remember; you recall only this one. 9) whoever knows, profoundly, my divine presence on earth is not re-born when he leaves the body, but comes to me. 10) Released from greed, fear, anger, absorbed in me and made pure by the practice of wisdom, many have attained my own state of being.

B.G. Steven Mitchell

In chapter 7 Krishna imparts knowledge to Arjuna of what he is;

*10) My eternal seed, Arjuna, is to be found in every creature. I am the power of discrimination in those that are intelligent, and the glory of the noble. 11) In those who are strong, I am strength, free from passion and selfish attachment. I am desire itself, if that desire is in harmony with the purpose of life.*

This verse and others, also in chapter 10, Krishna promotes himself as having only positive and higher qualities. However, in chapter 11 Krishna

shows Arjuna all of his power; Arjuna says:

*15) O Lord, I see within your body all the gods and every living creature. I see Brahma, the creator, seated on a lotus; I see the ancient sages and the celestial serpents. 16) I see infinite mouths and arms, stomachs and eyes, and you are embodied in every form. I see you everywhere, without beginning and without end. You are Lord of all creation, and the cosmos is your body. 20) O lord, your presence fills the heavens and the earth and reaches in every direction. I see the three worlds trembling before this vision of your wonderful and terrible form. 22) The multitudes of gods, demigods, and demons are all overwhelmed by the sight of you.*

So God is everything. The creator of all. The night and day, male and female, up and down, good and bad, birth and death, hot and cold, rich and poor, growth and decay, love and fear. God is balance.

Here Krishna has given Arjuna, not only knowledge of himself, but direct personal experience. Knowledge and experience combine to form wisdom. The Jnana yogi contemplates these truths and meditates on knowledge until it becomes experiential.

*"Whatever you know is just words", said Sanatkumara, "names of finite phenomena. It is the infinite that is the source of abiding joy because it is not subject to change. Therefore seek to know the infinite."*

*Chandogya upanishad*

*The practitioner of Jnana is an experimenter enquiring into the nature of reality not so much through mental analysis but through applied experience.*

*Derek Thorne*

*This is the path of spiritual knowledge and wisdom, suited to the intellectual temperament, in which the intellect penetrates the veils of ignorance that prevent man from seeing his true self (atman), which is other than the empirical ego.*

*James Hewitt*

## **Bhakti Yoga** ----- The Yoga of devotion

### Chapter 12 The way of love

In Karma Yoga and Jnana Yoga detachment is emphasised and so they can appear to be bland and austere. Bhakti Yoga encourages emotions to be used for the love and devotion of God. Singing, music, chanting, praying etc in the chosen name and image of god is encouraged in groups and individually. This public celebration can be exciting and intoxicating and so this yoga appeals to many who would find other forms of yoga too introspect and sacrificial.

*Bhakti Yoga is the celebration of the divine through love and devotion*

*Derek Thorne*



*Yoga is the science and the art of the union of the individual soul with*

*God. This union is not something to be generated or attained, per se; it already exists, it needs only to be realised and expressed to it's fullest potential. In the same manner that waves are already part of the ocean, being the very power of the ocean, likewise are the individual souls to God. The goal of Bhakti yoga , the path to spiritual devotion, is the realisation of this relationship between soul and god.*

*Prem Prakash*

*Bhagavad Gita chapter 12*

*2) Those who set their hearts on me and worship me with unflinching devotion and faith are more established in Yoga.*

*Narada Bhakti Sutras Chapter 1*

*5) Achieving spiritual devotion, one becomes completely desireless - grieving not, hating not, not rejoicing in fleeting happiness, without passion for personal concerns. 6) with realisation of spiritual devotion one becomes spiritually intoxicated; one becomes overwhelmed; one comes to rejoice in the Self. 7) Spiritual devotion does not arise from desire. Its nature is a state of inner peace.*

*Prem Prakash*

### **Carol's Personal Views of teaching aspects of the Gita in her Yoga classes**

When I started Yoga classes I was an atheist. If God or vedantic scriptures had been mentioned in any of the classes I attended through the years, I would have run a mile.

Through Buddhism I was introduced to the concept of living in the

moment, not dwelling on the past or future. I found this extremely helpful and totally non- religious. I could also accept the concept of looking within rather than searching for answers in the material world.

I had been educated in a religion that portrayed a God that was totally at odds with who I was and my understanding of life and the world. I believe there are many people in Britain today who feel this way.

Yoga gave me the tools to create the space to let in my own God, or to put it another way, to know the connection between my Self and everything else. It is an incredibly personal experience and, for those who have not had the experience, any talk about it can cause offence, frustration, misunderstanding etc. etc. So I never bring God into the class (she 's there anyway 😊) . I just teach the methods that enable space to be created for all the students in my class.

The concepts I take from the Gita are;

- ॐ Awareness of our bodies and minds in each moment and movement, including breath.
- ॐ Accepting, or at least acknowledging impermanence in the material world including death.
- ॐ Accept only that which you have experienced
- ॐ Follow your own dharma, know thyself, take responsibility
- ॐ The importance of slowing down, silence and space. Meditation
- ॐ Attitude and perspective dictates experience
- ॐ There is always choice.

Any teacher needs to be open and honest about the content of the class they teach. My main aim is to introduce Yoga to people who are looking for an improvement in their lives. I include Yoga philosophy in the list of course contents, but I do not list Vedantic literature.

*On this path no effort is wasted,  
no gain is ever reversed;  
even a little of this practice  
will shelter you from great sorrow.*

B.G. 2.40

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