About the *Bhagavad-Gita*

The *Bhagavad-Gita*, 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 Mohandas Gandhi turned to the*Gita* for inspiration almost daily.

Although it can be read as a self-contained book, the *Bhagavad-Gita* is actually a small part in the middle of the *Mahabharata* . As in the*Mahabharata* , the main story in the *Bhagavad-Gita* is the conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas.



## Background

Arjuna , a Pandava, has chosen his brother-in-law, Krishna , as his charioteer and trusted advisor for the coming battle with the Kauravas. At this early point in the story, Arjuna knows only that Krishna is a special person. He does not yet realize that Krishna is a god. 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. The great warrior Arjuna appears here in Chapter 2, weeping with frustration and confusion.

One of the main themes of the *Bhagavad-Gita* is the concept of **nonattached work,** the performance of one’s duty without concern for the results. This idea is tied to both the structure of Indian society and the Indian belief in reincarnation. Indian society was rigidly divided into social classes, or **castes**, each of which had its own special duties. In this selection, narrated by a character named Sanjaya, Krishna reminds Arjuna that as a member of the warrior caste, he is obligated to fight. He reminds him that the Atman, or soul, is eternal; it can be reborn into countless bodies.

## The Yoga of Knowledge

**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:** Bhisma 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 Atman**1**

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 for ever.

How can It die

The death of the body?

Knowing It birthless,

Knowing It deathless,

Knowing It endless,

For ever 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,

For ever 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.

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 for ever indestructible. Therefore, you should never mourn for any one.

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 Vedas**4**teach us about the three gunas**5**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.

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,

 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 abstinent**8**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.

 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

 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 Brahman:

 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.

## Critical Reading

**1. Respond:**Do you agree with Sri Krishna’s advice to Arjuna? Why or why not?

**2. (a) Recall:**When Arjuna is distraught at the beginning of the selection, whom does he ask for advice?**(b) Analyze Causes and Effects:**What is the cause of his confusion?

**3. (a) Recall:**What does Krishna explain to Arjuna about the Atman?**(b)Infer:**Why might that knowledge comfort Arjuna?

**4. (a) Recall:**What action does Krishna advise Arjuna to take?**(b) Analyze:**Does Arjuna have a choice? Why or why not?

**5. (a) Recall:**In what manner does Krishna advise Arjuna to fight?**(b)Deduce:**What will Arjuna ultimately gain from acting this way?

**6. (a) Analyze:**What do Krishna’s statements about the Atman suggest about the relationship between knowledge and action?**(b) Draw Conclusions:**Is one element in this relationship more important than the other? Explain.

**7. (a) Deduce:**What three Hindu beliefs does the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna promote?**(b) Connect:**How do these concepts relate to each other?

**8. Apply:**What advice might Krishna give to people in modern society who believe that wealth is the measure of success?