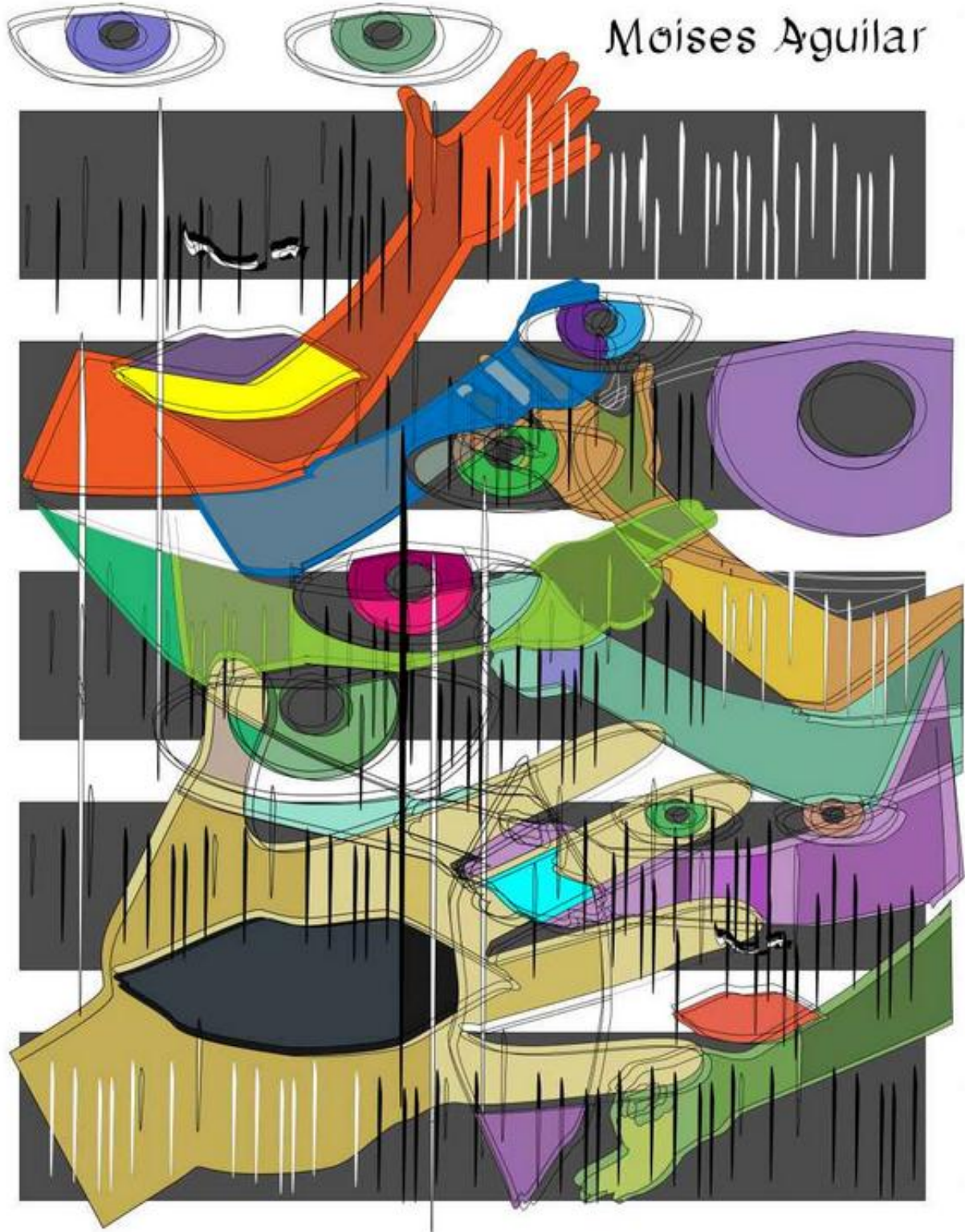


Symbols and Teachings in the Bhagavad Gita

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Symbols and Teachings in The Bhagavad Gita

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To Arjuna

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Eknath Easwaran (1910–1999) is respected around the world as the originator of passage meditation and as an authentic guide to timeless wisdom. His method is a practical approach that fits naturally into any faith, philosophy, or lifestyle, enabling us to bring universal ideals into daily life. Easwaran was a professor of English literature in India before coming to the United States in 1959 on the Fulbright exchange program. In 1961 he founded the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation which carries on his work today through publications and retreats. His 28 books have been published in 28 languages. For more information see www.easwaran.org.

Introduction

It is fascinating that Hinduism, actually any religion in the world, would allow the Bhagavad Gita to be part of their religious teachings. The Gita, as it is colloquially called, is the most fascinating critique of organized religion and social systems I have ever read. It is also fascinating that any religious organization would allow such a book to see the light of day, much less consider it a jewel within its teachings. The Christian religion has split into different factions for much less. I was born in Europe and I can confidently say that the Gita would have never been published there, and if anyone had done so, he would have been burned at the stake. Yes, we are known to have done that. I guess the world has truly come a long way to not only allow this book to be, but to embrace it and disseminate its message to the six continents.

Not only has Hinduism accepted the Bhagavad Gita to be part of its sacred texts, it considers this little book of 18 chapters and 701 verses to be the most shining jewel among its religious texts. And indeed it is. Not only among Hindu sacred texts, it is the most shining jewel among all religious texts ever written. It is so fascinating that it transcends religious doctrine. It is so deep that it transcends the concept of religion itself. The ideas it presents are against the accepted way we approach religion; and its definition of God makes all other definitions of God either questionable or flat out dismissible.

If the message is revolutionary today, I cannot imagine how revolutionary it was when written, which by the way, is pretty much impossible to ascertain. Like with most ancient Hindu texts, dating them is as hard as figuring out who wrote them. Both things are basically impossible. If you talk to an Indologist they will date the battle at Kurukshetra, the setting of the Bhagavad Gita, to be around 3000 B.C. and so they will proclaim the book was written then. If you listen to scholars, they will give you a date between 500 and 200 B.C. The people of India believe that the events in the Gita occurred and that the book is a historical account of what transpired at Kurukshetra so they date the book with the battle. The scholars' view is that someone wrote the message of the Gita using the setting at Kurukshetra but the book itself was written at a much later time. We could have the same conversation regarding when and how the Bible was written, so we should think twice before judging.

Regardless of when it was written, its message should have shaken the foundations of any religious society once understood. Fortunately, it made it to our days, so I can think of three reasons that allowed for such a wonderful thing to happen. First, it was written in the right place on Earth. Hinduism is a rare species among the religions of the world and its particular idiosyncrasies allowed the Gita to be embraced by the people of India. Every religion with the exception of Hinduism is like a tree. There is a trunk and then branches come out creating the different doctrines. Christianity has a common trunk and each branch differs a bit from the others. Same with Buddhism or Islam. However, Hinduism is like a river. Hinduism is not a religion created by a guy called "Hindu" like Christianity or Buddhism. Hinduism is the religion of the people of India. Furthermore, the people of India accept that all religions are true and that each one expresses its relation with divinity in their own particular way. Each religion in the world is understood to feed the eternal dharma, like a tributary flowing into a larger river. Its religious tolerance goes so far that it not only allows a book like the Gita to be, but accepts and embraces its message. No other religion in the world would have been able to pull this off.

Second, the message in the Gita is not easy to understand. When people read the Bhagavad Gita, they think that the book is about detachment and selfless action. It does mention these two things, but they are the tip of the iceberg. The Gita goes deep into human nature as well as the nature of the universe but does so using philosophical language and metaphors that are not easy to follow. It also seems to repeat itself when describing how an enlightened soul behaves so eventually it feels as if we are reading the same thing over and over. The Gita is an exercise in tenacity. Tenacity is what we need in order to realize that each time that Krishna describes the awakened soul, He does it within a different context, always in line with the theme of the chapter, so the ideas presented are not always the same. If you dig deep enough, the Gita is going to make you doubt every religious belief you have ever had. It is going to make you question your understanding of the mechanics of the universe and the role of the divine in everyday life.

This is where the third reason reveals itself. The message in the Gita is so uncomfortable that we do not want to hear it. Back in that day, both in the east and west, only the priests could read. They were the ones that translated the words of God for the common folk. It was definitely not in their interest to explain what the Gita truly said or their implications. Later on, when we the common people learned to read, we didn't want to accept what the Gita said either. It is more comfortable to continue with our daily lives and act as if we never heard such a thing. Questioning our entire belief system has never been a popular sport.

Interestingly enough, the Gita has been translated and discussed literally thousands of times and even Mahatma Gandhi himself has his own version. It was a routine practice for Gandhi to read verses of the Gita both in the original Sanskrit and in its translation to English and Gurajati, his native tongue. The Gita is a manual for self exploration. The opening scene of the book is quite dramatic. Arjuna, the co-protagonist of the Gita along with Krishna, is about to start the final battle that will decide who rules over India. When he gets to the battlefield he realizes he is fighting his own family members and that he will have to kill them to win. Arjuna cannot deal with such a stressful situation so chooses not to fight. Krishna, who is God, wants him to fight. He wants him to kill his family members in the opposing army. As atrocious as this idea may seem, Krishna is able to present a case that makes Arjuna consider fighting. That is the content of the Gita; Krishna's speech to convince Arjuna to fight. Throughout his speech he explains the universe, human nature and techniques to achieve enlightenment or liberation.

This book you are about to read is not a translation of the Bhagavad Gita. Its purpose is to identify the themes in the Gita, explore them in depth and try to relate them to us. When discussing the themes in the Gita, it uses verses from any of the chapters, so it refers to them by chapter number and then verse number. Verse 11.32 represents verse 32 in chapter 11. I have used Eknath Easwaran's translation of the Gita because I find it to connect best with the western reader, whom I am also trying to engage throughout my commentaries.

The book contrasts the eastern point of view with the western to help put in perspective the idea being discussed. When applicable, it also relates the concept in the Bhagavad Gita to the Yoga Sutras. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali along with the Bhagavad Gita are the traditional books on yoga philosophy. They are the two books that any sincere student of yoga should read, so the book relates the concepts in both yoga texts for these people. It also relates the Gita to Sankhya philosophy to provide context to some of

the ideas presented. Sankhya is the philosophical part of yoga, while yoga is the practical side of Sankhya. Texts on both yoga and Sankhya are considered part of the religious doctrine of India.

The book starts by providing context to the reader who may not be familiar with Indian religious texts. The Bhagavad Gita is not a standalone book, but it is part of the Mahabharata. First it explains the events in the Mahabharata that lead to the battle at Kurukshetra and gives a summary of the contents of the Gita as they are presented in the original text. Then, it discusses the symbology of the battle itself. The Gita points towards a spiritual battle right away so the chapters discuss how the events in the Mahabharata and the Gita relate to our lives. Lastly the book explores the symbology of the main characters at the battlefield.

Before talking about yoga, which is one of the main topics in the Gita, the book discusses a couple of eastern terms so those in the west who may not be familiar with eastern philosophy can make the best of the book. These topics include Krishna, the field and Brahman.

The next section is the discussion on yoga and the yogi. The word yoga does not refer to the physical exercise that we know in the west as “doing yoga” but to the etymological meaning of the word. Yoga means union in Sanskrit and it is used in this sense throughout the Gita. Krishna presents three yoga paths to achieve union with Life and the Self. These paths are Karma, Jnana and Bhakti Yoga.

Then we talk about the yogi, the one who has fulfilled the path of yoga, while adding techniques that the Gita discusses. These are meditation and sacrifice. The term sacrifice has a very special meaning in India that is not what we understand as sacrifice in the west, so we explore that.

The next section contains topics that explain how the world works. It discusses the mystical dynamics that make the material world exist, as well as the main belief systems that people adopt through life. The final set of chapters discuss how the universe is set up.

It is the goal of this book to serve as a study aid for eastern and yoga philosophy students as well as for those people who are just looking to improve their lives.

Hope you enjoy it,

Moisés

Leading to the battle at Kurukshetra

The Bhagavad Gita is part of a larger Epic Poem, The Mahabharata. The Mahabharata along with the Ramayana are the two main Epic Poems in the Sanskrit literature, the sacred literature of the Hindu religion. The purpose of Epic Poems is to explain in a more approachable manner the principles contained in the formal religious texts, the Vedas. Roughly speaking, the Vedas are to Hinduism what the Bible is to Christianity.

The Mahabharata is a story. Close to six thousand pages long, basically it narrates the struggles within an Indian ruling dynasty for the control of the country. The events in the Mahabharata are used to explain the social, ethical and cosmological aspects of the Hindu religion. All these aspects are considered within the eternal dharma that India lives by. Their religious texts encompass the ages of the universe, the lives of gods and deities, the interaction between the material world and the spiritual world, and the ideal social structures. All these aspects are understood to be connected and should be in synch. During the Mahabharata, the different stories are used to explain these rules and the Gita is much in line with this.

All the events in the Mahabharata lead towards the final battle at Kurukshetra, where the conversation in the Bhagavad Gita takes place. The battle at Kurukshetra is going to be decisive on determining who will reign over India as the Pandavas face the Kauravas to reclaim the throne. Right before the battle, Arjuna is filled with doubts regarding fighting his family and does not want to battle. The Gita is Krishna's response to Arjuna's hesitation. Bhagavad Gita can be translated as Divine Song, referring to all the teachings that Krishna imparts on Arjuna during the book. Arjuna, the leader of the Pandava side, is the hero in the Mahabharata as the story follows him and his brothers in their adventures. He is a skilled warrior as well as a person of pure intentions while Krishna is the incarnation of God, although not even Arjuna is aware of the extent of His nature as we learn during the Gita. At Kurukshetra, Krishna is going to act as Arjuna's charioteer, driving his chariot in battle.

The Pandavas are descendents of King Pandu while the Kauravas are descendents of blind King Dhritarashtra. Dhritarashtra and Pandu were brothers. Although Dhritarashtra was older than Pandu and therefore the rightful heir, he was blind, so Pandu became king. However, King Pandu died young and his sons were also too young to become kings themselves so blind Dhritarashtra became king in their stead. Since Dhritarashtra was the legitimate heir to the throne, his descendents are called Kauravas as direct descendents of King Kuru, the original ruler many generations prior. Arjuna and his brothers are called Pandavas – being sons of King Pandu – in order to differentiate them from the Kauravas.

Therefore, the Pandavas and the Kauravas are cousins; they even grew up in the same household. The Pandavas are five brothers while the Kauravas are a hundred. The older son of Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana, is the leader of the Kaurava army and he hates the Pandavas. He should have been the rightful heir to the crown but this was taken away from him because his father was blind. As depicted in the Mahabharata, after various failed attempts at taking the Pandavas lives, Duryodhana challenges the Pandavas to a gambling game, which he rigs. Due to the game, the Pandavas lose their kingdom and have to go into exile for thirteen years. When the Pandavas come back, they request their kingdom back

but Duryodhana refuses. Then the Pandavas request just five villages, so they can serve as princes, as required by their noble birth but Duryodhana also refuses. At this point, the Pandavas have no option but to go to war with their cousins. Family members are forced to choose between the two factions and are ready to go to battle as the Bhagavad Gita unfolds.

Krishna, besides being the incarnation of God, is also a cousin to the Pandavas. Of all relatives, Krishna has the most interesting approach to the family dispute. Krishna decides not to fight, since he is God, but gives two options to the contenders. One side can get his entire army, while the other side can have him but only as an advisor. Duryodhana, the older son of blind king Dhritarashtra, takes the army, while the Pandavas are happy to have Krishna himself as an advisor. This is the way that Krishna becomes Arjuna's charioteer, providing the set for the conversation outlined in the Bhagavad Gita.

A Summary of the Gita

The Bhagavad Gita is written in the form of a dialogue. There is neither a narrator nor descriptions. The book announces who is talking and we read what he is saying right away. There are two locations, one at the battlefield and a second one at the palace. King Dhritarashtra is at the palace with the seer Sanjaya while Arjuna and Krishna are at Kurukshetra.

The Bhagavad Gita starts at the palace as king Dhritarashtra's asks the seer Sanjaya to tell him what is happening at the battlefield. The seer is able to see what is unfolding at Kurukshetra as it happens and he can relate it to the king. He starts with a conversation between the king's son Duryodhana and his general regarding both armies. When the conversation turns to Krishna and Arjuna, the Gita leaves the palace and moves to the battlefield.

At Kurukshetra, the Kauravas and the Pandavas are about to start the final battle which will determine who rules over the kingdom of India and the tension grows as each army blows their battle conch horns. Krishna is driving Arjuna's chariot and the warrior asks Krishna to drive to the middle of the battlefield, between the two armies, so he can see the enemy. Looking at the opposing army, Arjuna realizes that he is fighting his family and elders, people he loves and respects, and does not want to fight. This is how the first chapter ends. Chapter 1 is the set up for the conversation that is about to start between Krishna and Arjuna.

Chapter 2 starts with Krishna questioning Arjuna's doubts and the warrior expressing his reasons for not wanting to fight. Krishna starts explaining how nothing really dies and how everything is eternal; how the Self is beyond everything we can see; and how it cannot be slain. He then reminds him of his duty as a warrior to fight. Krishna's first speech makes a turn and starts talking about the path of yoga and about renouncing to the fruits of one's work. He finally mentions detachment and overcoming duality. Arjuna then asks how do people who have achieved all this behave and Krishna responds by describing how they conduct themselves. He mentions how they can withdraw from the senses, control the mind, renounce to selfish desires, and stay calm in the face of success or failure. This kind of speech is repeated over and over throughout the Gita and every other chapter contains a slightly different version of how an enlightened soul would behave. This concludes chapter 2. This chapter is considered a summary of the Gita since it touches on several points that will be discussed further in the coming chapters. Not every single topic is mentioned but it does talk about many different subjects that are sprinkled throughout the book later on.

It seems like Krishna's speech in chapter 2 does not clarify much for Arjuna, since he starts chapter 3 asking questions. Throughout the book this occurs often. Krishna will explain a certain topic and Arjuna will ask questions that allow Krishna to further the explanation. Some other times, Krishna decides what topic to discuss himself and talks about it.

Chapter 3 talks about Karma Yoga, also known as yoga in action or the yoga of action. Karma Yoga consists in performing your duty without any attachment, without expecting any results and renouncing to the fruits of your labor. This last point was already mentioned in chapter 2. He also mentions the gunas and their relation to the Self, all in the context of Karma Yoga. In the Indian tradition, the gunas are the rules that drive the physical world and Krishna reminds us not to believe that we are our bodies.

Chapter 3 closes with a brief discussion on how the guna rajas brings selfish desire and anger and how it clouds judgment.

Chapter 4 opens with Krishna discussing his own nature. Since he is eternal, he remembers his previous incarnations and how everything comes from him. Then, he once more brings up the topic of correct action and the appropriate perspective to perform it, which is based on detachment.

The next topic Krishna talks about is Brahman. He does not discuss Brahman's nature, that comes in a later chapter, but he mentions how Brahman is eternal, ever-present and sacred. He covers the different offerings people bring to Brahman and how the offering cleans them. However, Krishna states that the best offering is work, bringing the conversation back to detached action, now in relation to offering it to Brahman. He goes as far as saying that when selfless service is offered to Brahman one can achieve liberation. Chapter 4 closes with a brief discussion on spiritual wisdom, which is related to Jnana Yoga.

Chapter 5 opens with Arjuna asking about selfless action and sannyasa, which is traditionally known as leaving the world and retiring to the forest to work on one's spiritual path. Krishna surprisingly endorses the path of selfless action, and not retiring to the forest. Traditionally in India, people would leave their regular lives and retire to the forest, usually at a later time in life, and this was accepted as the proper way to pursue one's spiritual path. Krishna's response was therefore probably surprising and revolutionary at the time.

Krishna then discusses the path of action further and relates it to the path of knowledge, pointing out how they are one and the same. He describes again the behavior of a person who acts in a detached manner and complements it with a description of a person with the right knowledge. One who performs detached and selfless deeds lives happy and one with the correct knowledge lives free from delusion. Both ways are basically one and the same. He then mentions how the material world brings unhappiness and how the wise make an effort to rise above their material desires by using meditation and controlling their minds. In this manner, chapter 5 ends.

Chapter 6 starts with Krishna talking about meditation and the ascension route that those working on their spiritual path follow. First he talks in general about how those working on their path should use selfless service and how those who have achieved the goal of yoga should still their minds. He closes the intro to the chapter by telling Arjuna how the will is the best friend of the Self when under control.

Next Krishna starts discussing the ascension path from the top down, starting with how an enlightened soul behaves. Krishna describes how an enlightened person behaves numerous times throughout the book so it seems like a repetition, but this time falls within the context of the path we should follow. The next people he discusses are those who aspire to achieve the state of yoga. For those he recommends meditation so Krishna goes into a detail discussion about how to meditate. After Krishna's description on the benefits of meditating, Arjuna asks how can we quiet the mind when it seems so impossible for him. Krishna responds that with practice one can achieve it so Arjuna follows up by asking about what happens to those who try and fail. Krishna's encouraging answer is that no effort ever goes to waste and that such people will be born in a future life under circumstances that are beneficial for their spiritual development. Krishna ends the chapter with a couple of emphatic sentences in support of meditation.

Chapter 7 talks about Jnana Yoga, or the yoga of knowledge. Krishna identifies the relationship between the Self and the field to be the essential piece of knowledge to understand. The field provides the material experience we call life while the Self observes what is occurring. Understanding this properly is the essence of Jnana Yoga. Out of all the people that come to Krishna in worship, he identifies those that have attained wisdom to be the closest to him in nature. He then discusses what people worship. Some worship him, others worship the gods, and others worship their personal desires. He explains how we get what we focus on and how worshipping him is the wisest course of action. This is meaningful within the context of Jnana Yoga because the Self equates to Krishna while the rest exists only within the realm of the field. The point Krishna is trying to make is that if we worship him we are worshipping something that is eternal, but if we worship that which only exists within the field we will not achieve much because the field is by definition perishable. Another misconception Krishna alludes to is our confusing him with his body. He makes clear that although he takes a body, he is imperishable and truly exists in another reality beyond ours. Krishna explains that this misconception comes from being under the influence of the field and only those who rise above it are free from delusion. Krishna ends by saying that in order to achieve liberation, one should seek refuge in him.

Arjuna starts chapter 8 asking Krishna about Brahman, the self, the gods, and the personal material manifestation – what we call the body. These are the different levels of creation, some visible, some invisible and some beyond the entire universe. Krishna's answer discusses death and how having him in mind will help us go towards him at the time of our death. He discusses the enlightened souls as those who always remember him and are attached to nothing else, explaining once more the characteristics of the yogi. This leads to the concept of the day and night of Brahma by which the universe is created and destroyed successively in a never ending cycle. He closes the chapter with the two paths a soul can follow after death, one leading to liberation and the other to rebirth.

In chapter 9 Krishna brings up the concepts of Jnana Yoga once more. He explains how the field is brought about by him but he is untouched by it. He then identifies himself with different facets of life, providing examples and metaphors for his role as the creator and sustainer. He then explains how our next life and where we go between lives is determined by whatever we worship. He explains how ultimately, regardless of what we worship, we are worshipping him and he finishes the chapter by saying that he will accept anybody who wants to follow him regardless of their past.

Chapter 10 marks a turning point in the Gita. For the first time, Arjuna explicitly accepts Krishna as God and identifies Him with the highest abode and eternal spirit. Krishna's response is to give us a second list of examples and metaphors, this time covering all aspects of the Indian cosmology. Krishna says things like "among the shining gods I am Vishnu," verse 10.21 or "among the words, the syllable OM," verse 10.25. He continues this way till the end of the chapter. Chapter 10 is curiously the middle point of the Bhagavad Gita so Arjuna does not recognize Krishna as the supreme god for the first nine chapters while he does during the last nine.

Chapter 11 opens with Arjuna confessing that his doubts have been removed and that he has understood the message that Krishna has been trying to transmit. The fighter then requests that Krishna shows Himself in His true form and Krishna complies. This is probably the most famous chapter in the

Gita. Often times Krishna is depicted with numerous heads, arms and legs portraying how He showed Himself to Arjuna in this chapter.

In order for Arjuna to see Krishna's true form he needs spiritual vision so Krishna bestows it upon the warrior. Astutely, the Gita jumps back to the palace to let Sanjaya the seer relate what he is witnessing and present the initial image of Krishna in His full expression. Arjuna picks up after Sanjaya's description and tells Krishna what he is seeing. He mentions how Krishna's "presence fills the heavens and the Earth and reaches in every direction," verse 11.20. As the warrior keeps describing what he is witnessing he sees the outcome of the battle and how everyone is devoured by Krishna himself. Arjuna's vision ends up as a frightful image and he asks Krishna who He is. Krishna responds with the terrifying message: "I am time, the destroyer of all," verse 11.32. Arjuna is then quite frightened and asks for forgiveness for all the times he treated Krishna with too much familiarity. Krishna then takes his regular form back and the warrior calms down. Before ending the chapter, Krishna tells Arjuna that the only way to have this vision was by worshiping Him directly. Curiously, Sanjaya at the palace was also able to see Krishna in His true form as we learned in the beginning of the chapter.

Chapter 12 is about Bhakti Yoga, or the yoga of devotion. The chapter starts by Arjuna asking whether it is better to worship Krishna as a personality or as an abstract formless reality. Krishna's preference is that we relate to Him personally and directly. He describes different practices to follow from selfless service to knowledge or meditation, and then finishes the chapter by once more describing how a true devotee behaves.

In chapter 13 Krishna expands further on the field, already discussed in chapters 7 and 9. The field and knowledge of the field, which Krishna defines as the core topic of Jnana Yoga, is the main subject of the second half of the Gita. Krishna approaches the field from different perspectives, explaining to Arjuna how life is set up by using different images and metaphors. From this perspective, the Gita is a book on Jnana Yoga. It provides knowledge on the field and the Self, which are the key pieces of knowledge we must understand if we want to follow the Jnana Yoga path.

In chapter 13, after giving a more technical definition of the field He introduces Brahman, and then talks about purusha and prakriti, the main tattvas of the Sankhya philosophy. He uses Brahman and the tattvas to further explain the relationship between the Self – or the knower of the field – and the field itself. Once more He describes how one who has understood all this behaves which is pretty much in line with every other description of an enlightened soul the Gita has given so far.

Chapter 14 expands on the field further and talks about the gunas, which are the principles that rule the field. This chapter is very practical in terms of how to live and what to do in our regular daily lives. There are three gunas, which Krishna uses to explain the different ways to approach anything in life. Sattva is the pure guna that represents the correct path, rajas is the selfish guna that always acts egotistically, and tamas is the deluded guna that doesn't know right from wrong. After Krishna provides examples of how to act according to each guna in numerous situations Arjuna asks how does one who is beyond the gunas act. Krishna's response is similar to previous explanations of how an enlightened person behaves.

Chapter 15 starts with the image of the asvattha tree or the tree of the world. This tree is a metaphor for how the universe – or the field – is set up. Krishna explains how He is the supporter of the tree, the

supporter of life, and how only those in the path of yoga can see this. He describes three states of being, first the perishable material world of separate creatures, then changeless spirit and lastly a reality beyond everything, where Krishna has His true being from which He supports the entire cosmos from within. In this chapter, Krishna describes the enlightened person as the one who is aware of that reality beyond.

Chapter 16 takes an interesting turn right before wrapping up the Gita. This chapter is dedicated to the dark side, what Krishna calls the demonic. Basically the demonic sounds like the world we currently live in. It is materialistic, unaware of the spiritual world, hypocritical, proud and arrogant. In short, a society based on having most comfortable possible life without any regard for whom is truly paying for it.

Chapter 17 is the beginning of the end of the book. This chapter mentions the gunas again but uses them to describe personal tendencies. This chapter is called the three divisions of material existence, or the three divisions of faith, and describes the three ways of approaching life. In this chapter, Krishna describes the sattva, rajas and tamas ways of living as He discusses our habits and belief systems. Right before closing the chapter, He brings up the term "OM Tat Sat" to describe Brahman and gives a short explanation of it.

Finally we come to chapter 18, where the Gita ends. This chapter starts with Arjuna asking about the types of renunciation and Krishna's answer is along the lines of the Karma Yoga principles. Krishna briefly explains action along the lines of Sankhya philosophy and then brings the gunas up once more, using them to explain the ways we absorb knowledge, use our will and experience happiness. He uses the gunas again to explain the qualities of each group in the Indian caste system which leads to a short comment on how everyone should follow their own path or dharma.

Before finishing, Krishna once more describes how an enlightened person acts, this time discussing how these special souls attain Brahman. Then He recommends Arjuna devote his every act to Him bringing up the war they are about to fight. Once more, Krishna urges Arjuna to fight, thus reminding the reader of the reason they were having this lengthy discussion in the first place. Arjuna acknowledges that his doubts have been dispelled and that he is now ready to fight. Finally, Sanjaya the seer closes the book stating that the army with Krishna on its side cannot lose.

The Transcendental War

War is the context of the Bhagavad Gita but right away the book points towards a spiritual war. On the first verse the battlefield is described as “dharma-kshetra,” which can be translated as “dharma-field” or the field of dharma. The Gita may be describing the battlefield as the field of dharma because Arjuna and all the warriors in the battlefield have to follow their own dharma by fighting. Those gathered at Kurukshetra are warriors and their duty, their dharma, is to go to war when necessary. This could be one reason why the Gita uses the term dharmakshetra.

Another reason why the Gita refers to the battlefield as dharma-kshetra may be related to the spiritual knowledge that the book is about to impart on us. Dharma is not only our duty in life, it is our divine duty. Dharma implies living a righteous life and doing what we are supposed to do. It represents our life path or life’s mission. Thereby, the Gita could be pointing to the spiritual lesson it contains. Following our spiritual path is part of everyone’s dharma so the Gita could be pointing this out. By equating the field of dharma to a battlefield, the Bhagavad Gita is equating our spiritual path to waging a war. The war is the struggle we all have to go through to fight our lower desires in order to realize our true or high nature and fulfill our life’s purpose.

Dharma is different for each individual and this is an important point. “It is better to strive in one’s own dharma than to succeed in the dharma of another,” verse 3.35 tells us. In India, each one’s dharma was traditionally derived from the caste. The traditional caste system broke down society into four groups: the priests and scholars, the warriors and rulers, the skilled professionals and merchants, and finally the apprentices and servants. There is a fifth caste, the untouchables, who are really outside the caste system and who perform the jobs that nobody wants. In this traditional system, the family you are born to determines what your dharma is and the kind of activities you can perform during your life.

As time passed, the main four castes were subdivided and new castes sprung out. Nowadays there are two hundred castes at least. This got to the extreme of having a caste just for washing clothes, for example. If you were born into the dhobi caste, your life’s profession was going to be washing clothes and you had no other option. The caste system completely ruled life in India up to its independence from the British. Nowadays, the caste system is still very much present, but special provisions were made during their independence process in order to provide opportunities to everyone regardless of caste.

In the west, society was not broken into these kinds of explicit groups, although family did determine the environment that one would enjoy. Dharma in its connotation of “duty” is what the Judeo-Christian tradition is about. It is one’s duty to comply with society and live a righteous life. For the west, this is synonymous with a life approved by the group, the system. The industrial revolution and economic opportunity changed this quite a bit and the system evolved towards a meritocracy; if one had the right education and intellect, one could aspire to certain roles in society regardless of background. There was too much work to be done, so whoever had the ability to do the job would get the opportunity to do it. Despite of opportunity social pressure remained all the way to our days.

These days the understanding of dharma could be expanded even further as people work to reach their personal goals and dreams. As society evolves, our definition of dharma can as well. Nowadays we are not born into our dharma but we usually have to look for it. Dharma has evolved from an obligation into an opportunity. Dharma could be understood nowadays as following our passion. In the purest Indian understanding, this passion would have to be divinely bestowed to be considered dharma though.

What the Gita says is that we must pursue it, we must pursue our dharma and our passion in life. We often find ourselves in a job that we don't especially like just because we can do it well, instead of making an effort to follow our passion, our dharma. Even if we could not be as good doing that which we love, it is our universal duty to pursue it in detriment of a safe and mundane job that we are good at. "It is better to perform one's own duties imperfectly than to master the duties of another," the Gita tells us in verse 18.47. This verse is talking about what we are supposed to do, our dharma. The Gita, following the eastern mindset, implicitly assumes that there is a job that we are supposed to be doing. This is our purpose or dharma in life.

The Gita recognizes that this is a war and that it will require an effort from our part to accomplish it. In this context a new interpretation of "dharma-kshetra" becomes available. The Bhagavad Gita is not only describing a personal internal struggle but it is also describing the fight against society to pursue our dreams. The Gita is talking about "the system." The pursuit of our dharma is a struggle against the system, a struggle against society, against the average mind and regular people. Following our passion is a struggle against the standard and the accepted understanding of right and wrong.

Everyone that finds him or herself following their passion struggles against society's views. The Bhagavad Gita is telling us that this struggle, following our dharma and passion, is a war. The Kauravas represent the system, while Arjuna represents the person pursuing his own dharma. The king of the Kauravas, Dhritarashtra, represents money, the king of the system. Money is as blind as Dhritarashtra; at least blind to spiritual matters. Money will support that which can make more money and will punish that which puts the system at risk. What the system regards as right or wrong is a coin toss, since it is driven by blind principles. Sometimes what money promotes is spiritually commendable and sometimes it is not. Just as in the Mahabharata, the world today is ruled by a blind king.

Throughout history we have seen how people who have had an impact in society, those who changed how we live, had to fight the system. As Gandhi said: "first they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." Very few people supported Gandhi in the beginning but later his movement became a revolution that gave independence to an entire country. Every meaningful change in society has occurred as a revolution to some extent. The fact that revolutions have been less and less bloody as time passed should be an indicator that we are evolving as a human species, despite what we may think.

Every passion has a component of change associated to it and we don't need to fight for the independence of a country to experience this. All we have to do is provide a new vision, a new point of view, and we will feel the system's resistance. The value of the system comes in helping us evaluate the merit of our idea. For an idea to be worthy of pursuing it must bring value to others. As averse to change

as the system is, there are always those who will support a good idea either because they see its value or because they have a need. If a new idea comes at the right time to the right place, it will gain support. This is how our passions are judged.

Money, the blind king, judges ideas solely on profitability, which says nothing about the quality of life of those who get to live with the results of the new idea. Money is judging the ability to implement our idea in the current structure. It has no ability to look to the future or to have in mind the past. Unless this perspective is consciously explored, profitability analysis is not equipped to provide it. As king Dhritarashtra is blind, so is money. But blind is not always bad. Our need to make our ideas work in the real world helps us question our approach. Money provides a check and balance against the applicability and feasibility of our projects. Sometimes we will sell our souls to achieve our goals at any cost, and other times we will not let what we consider a pure idea be ruined because the system can only accept it in a certain way.

People's mindsets and profitability will create a struggle that we have to fight against, both inwards as well as outwards. We will need to fight city hall to change ways, but we will also have to fight our attachment to our own ways if we want to see a project to fruition. Just as Arjuna is fighting his family, we must remember that when we try to change the system we are doing it for the system. We are fighting those for whom we are fighting, as in fighting your own family for the sake of your family.

The external versus the internal struggle corresponds to seeing the battle field as Kurukshetra versus dharmakshetra. The struggle we have with society is represented by the physical war, the one led at Kurukshetra, while the internal struggle is maintained within ourselves and occurs at dharmakshetra. The field of dharma is ultimately ourselves and the struggles we have with others, with society, or with the system are just the vehicles to create the internal war.

Another connotation of dharma is our righteous duty. It refers to taking the high road and doing the right thing even if it is against popular belief. This spiritual dilemma is clearly represented by Duryodhana's decision regarding Krishna's army. Krishna offered two options to the contenders, one side would get his army while the other side would get him as an advisor. Duryodhana chose to have Krishna's army while Arjuna got Krishna but only as an advisor, not as a fighter. If God came to you and asked you to choose between the riches of the world and divine advice, which one would you choose? What if you were bankrupt at the time? Arjuna was beyond bankrupt. He had lost a kingdom in a rigged game, had to leave his home country as a result and upon return the king would not give him back anything, not even a little village to rule. Despite this hopeless situation he was happy to have Krishna's advice on the battlefield instead of Krishna's army.

The dilemma, the spiritual war presented in the Bhagavad Gita, appears even before the book starts. If you had lost everything you had in the world, would you take money or divine advice to fix your situation? If you believe that money has a better chance of helping than divine advice, you would be acting like Duryodhana. This is not the struggle between good and evil, it is the brutal clash of two irreconcilable perspectives on what life is about. From Duryodhana's view life is about keeping the body alive and having a pleasant physical experience. From this perspective one chooses armies over Gods,

money over advice. When facing a challenging situation we have two ways of looking at it; as a punishment, focusing on the pain we are going through; or as a growing experience, focusing on what we can learn in the process. The punishment view brings no value, as it provides no opportunity for change. Seeing it as a growth opportunity makes us hopefully wiser so one day we will choose advice over money. We would like to think that we are Arjuna but if we ever want to get there, we must realize that in fact we are Duryodhana. The system has taken us over. The system teaches us that the good guy always loses and that at the end of the day you need to pick a gun to win the battle. Just as in the movies. Television is the educator of the system, it is Duryodhana's propaganda machine. This is where we are today, and we must accept it if we want to win this war.

If we think we are already pure and holy we will not fight and would have lost the battle before it started. The real war is against our own erroneous ideas and beliefs. As Patanjali in his Yoga Sutras explains, evolution is a process of undoing. It is not so much that we need to get new and correct ideas but that we need to get rid of the erroneous ones. Our focus should not be on making Arjuna win but on defeating Duryodhana. By killing our Duryodhana views, Arjuna's views may come naturally. By removing our erroneous beliefs, a natural connection to life can develop. It is from this connection that a new understanding and philosophy is gained. The wrong ideas we have today prevent us from developing this connection and gaining the knowledge associated with it. This is the basic premise of the practice of meditation presented in both the Sutras and the Gita. Meditation allows us to create that connection to Life and it is via that connection that we gain knowledge so we do not have to look outside for guidance.

The process of undoing we must undergo is another reason this is a war; because we will die in the end. Whether we win or lose, we will die. And that is a good thing. This is the warrior's death in a righteous war whose result is heaven. Again this is symbolic. Religious wars are not supposed to be wars of the body but of the mind and spirit. We need to fight our current self for the promise of a better version of ourselves. What death means in this context is change. The old views are abandoned and the person we were no longer exists, leaving the door open to a new us. The fight is against our attachment to our current mindset and when we let go we change, letting our old personality die and gaining a new one.

Whether we start this process or life does is not going to change the fact that it will feel like war. When we are faced with a challenge we ask why me? Why now? Why this? That is our declaration of war. Our current mindset cannot withstand the reality of the challenge we are facing so our values come under siege. The only way out is transformation. The same transformation that Arjuna underwent.

The goal as well as the challenge is to come up with a new point of view, a new perspective from which to look at the problem. The Bhagavad Gita is the ultimate expression of this approach. In order to convince Arjuna to fight, Krishna explains to him how the universe works. His goal was to change the fighter's perception of the situation so he could see that fighting was the correct thing to do.

The initial approach that Krishna takes to convince Arjuna is to remind him of his duty as a Kshatriya to fight. He also tells him about what he will gain if he wins and what he will lose if he does not fight. This is how chapter 2 starts. These arguments are not enough to help Arjuna cope with the difficulty of the

situation. The reasons initially presented by Krishna were not sufficient for Arjuna to feel at peace with himself should he engage in that battle. Krishna's reaction is to explain to Arjuna the secrets of the universe. Through the explanation, Arjuna's perspective widens and sees the battle in front of him with a different set of eyes. This new perspective where the battle is placed in a universal context is able to let Arjuna engage. Seeing this same situation from a different perspective puts Arjuna in a position where he could consider and accept what Krishna had to tell him. How we gain the new perspective is not important. The important aspect is that it must always be agreeable to us, while helping us see the situation with less stress. This is not always an easy task as shown in the Bhagavad Gita. Arjuna's situation was extreme, he had to engage in war with his own family and kill them in order to gain the kingdom back. Having to kill his teachers and elders created an enormous amount of stress in Arjuna and his initial mindset was not able to cope with it.

The knowledge that Krishna imparted on Arjuna is universal so it was always there. The same way, there is knowledge for us to gain at any moment, but life has to wait until we are ready to listen. Like Arjuna, we need to get in trouble first to start listening. Challenges and difficulties may be the universal delivery mechanism for knowledge, and the function of every challenge is to prepare our minds to accept a piece of information we would not have considered otherwise. In our own lives, Krishna's role is played by another person or a book. The role of this advisor is to present to us a new point of view. The information in itself is not enough. What will make a difference is our consideration and acceptance of the newly presented information. This is the role of the challenging situation, to put us in a position where we can accept the new ideas.

We are in constant war, a war against ourselves. This may sound horrible but as Krishna says in verse 18.37 when talking about what makes the enlightened person happy, "It will feel like poison at first but will taste as nectar at the end." This constant spiritual war makes life interesting. It makes us see ourselves as interesting. We are a battlefield of conflicting perspectives all affecting how we see life and the time we spend on Earth becomes a mystery to solve and understand how we function. This is the transcendental war.

The Characters at Kurukshetra

The characters at Kurukshetra are divided into two opposing armies. The Pandavas, Arjuna and his brothers as well as Krishna, are the heroes in the Mahabharata. They are the good guys. The opposing army, the Kauravas, are the bad guys; and they represent the system as we already discussed. The main characters on the Kaurava side, the system, are Duryodhana and his blind father king Dhritarashtra. The system is organized around the premise that life is fundamentally a physical experience. Their role in the Mahabharata is clear from the beginning. They are the enemy who lose the battle against divine advice. The goal of the system is to maintain the body alive, which is not a bad goal. The problem is that it is based on fear so too much is sacrificed in the process. The system is simply the consequence of believing that we are nothing more than a body.

Our current society, driven mostly by western values, maintains a humanistic view based on the belief that the body is all that there is. This is a key difference between eastern and western philosophies. The western view regards the physical world as real and the invisible world as a projection of organic functions, thereby deeming the spiritual world illusory. Eastern philosophy regards the invisible world real and the physical world as an elaborate illusion. By invisible I mean not accessible to any technological means, not observable in a laboratory. Also, I am not talking about regular people but about philosophical perspectives. Western philosophy starts with the man and moves outwards and up, explaining the universe from a physical perspective and considering gods as abstractions of organic energies. Eastern philosophy starts with universal energy and moves downwards, explaining how consciousness creates the physical man.

Nowadays almost everyone in the entire world believes he or she is a body. This belief is what I am calling the western point of view since it is what western thought is based on. In the west we believe we are a body that dies once and then we may or may not go somewhere else. The word consciousness is used to talk about our perspective on life but consciousness itself is a mysterious function of the brain. We know we exist because we think, which is also understood to be function of the brain. These ideas are plain truths to westerners and challenging them makes anybody sound deranged in their eyes.

In the east it is a bit more complex. On the one hand we have the philosophical view which deems the spiritual world as real and the material world as maya, or illusion. On the other hand we have the “regular folk” who believe they are a body as we do in the west. When these two views are combined it is not strange then that people in China, Tibet, Japan or India believe in ghosts and spirits; they are projecting the spirit world from their philosophical background into the physical world, which is where their mindset is. For ease of discussion I’ll keep referring to the two views as east and west since it simplifies the discourse. West equals to the body being real, and the spirit world debatable; east equals to spirit being real and physical world illusion.

Just as in the Gita, the system, or the west, is in charge of the world nowadays. It is western views that drive how we organize ourselves socially, politically and economically. This is who we are at this time, this is where the world is mentally and spiritually. In the traditional esoteric literature this is called the lower self, the basic or animalistic nature in man. Society is based on keeping the body alive. Giving the body a pleasant life is seen as good while the opposite is bad. The importance we give to money comes

from being able to buy things to make the body feel good and look better. Since money can buy ultimate physical comfort we regard it as the king of the system.

But we are already changing as a society. The adoption of eastern ideas in the west is a physical manifestation of this evolution. This adoption happens in two ways. When we adopt yoga in the west we can either make a business out of it, or use yoga's ideas to question our own belief system. Making a business out of yoga is as if Duryodhana's army had captured and enlisted a fighter from the Pandava side. The Pandavas, Arjuna's side, represents the spiritual view, so by making just a business out of yoga we are tainting the ideas of the Pandavas. From this physical perspective yoga becomes a business for fitness. When we think we are a body it makes sense to use yoga asanas to make the body look better. This is what we usually do in the west, we teach a fitness class with yoga poses and we call it yoga.

What we want is to join the Pandavas. When we use yoga philosophy to question our point of view we are leaving the Kaurava army and joining the Pandavas. The questioning of our current value system represents our defection from the Kaurava army. We do not necessarily need to take eastern views. What is important is that we let our current mindset go. Our current mindset with incorrect ideas represents our belonging to the Kaurava side so letting those wrong ideas go is what we are seeking. For the east, as the Yoga Sutras say, evolution is a process of undoing. It is the undoing of our wrong beliefs that helps us advance. Yoga philosophy is the vehicle we use to accomplish this. By considering other ideas, hopefully better ones, we are able to leave our incorrect ones and in that process evolve.

By questioning the accepted social views we are seen as outsiders and dangerous. We either are in the system or out, and if we do not defend it we are against it. Categorical views are another feature of western philosophy. The body cannot be a little bit dead. There is no gray zone since life and death are categorical statements as they relate to the body. When we question the system we are putting an entire way of life at risk, we are putting the survival of the race and the culture at risk. Or at least that is what the system thinks.

If the questioning of our current belief system represents defection, the process of its removal represents the fight. The fight is the phase of undoing we must go through. The battlefield is not physical but inside of us. This approach is once more eastern in nature. The fighting process consists of getting rid of the views of the system, which is an eastern approach. For the east we are spirit and we have been confused by having a physical experience. The process of evolution consists in undoing the ideas we have as a result of inhabiting a body and having no recollection of being more. Evolution is achieved through removing the incorrect ideas and not by acquiring new ones. Acquiring new ones is a western approach. For the west we come into this world as a blank piece of paper – tabula rasa – and it is the process of education that makes useful citizens out of us. For the east, the physical body we inhabit skews our views and understanding of life.

The eastern view and its understanding of a perfect nature beyond what is visible regards the physical world as a made-up realm. By removing our wrong ideas we will be able to connect to reality, to have a first-hand experience with the true nature of everything, which is beyond the physical realm. The sensed objects are just the physical expression of something that exists beyond, like in Plato's cave. In Plato's story of the cave, we see shadows on the wall and we think that they are real when the real thing is behind us. We need to look away from the wall to see how the real object is being projected onto the

wall by the light of the fire. We also need to realize that the fire is the one creating the shadows on the wall. The same way, in eastern philosophy, the material object is not the real thing but an illusion, like a shadow. To see the real object we must look to the spiritual world and understand the process that enables the object to express itself in the physical realm.

For the east, consciousness acts as the fire in the cave and the shadow is the material object we see in the physical world. To understand the object, we need to see beyond the material world and in order to achieve this we need to give up the physical perspective of life. From the eastern point of view, life is perfect as it is and it is our judgment and our own roadblocks that create the suffering. If we got out of our own way, we would be able to experience life differently. As we say nowadays, we are our own worst enemy.

Seeing life as perfect is a tough idea to swallow for the system. In the west, nature is seen as faulty and something to be overcome. From a physical perspective all we can do is endure what life puts in our way, and there is no reason whatsoever why life should be enjoyable. Life is seen as a random sequence of events that turned out to create life as we know it. The events we live are a consequence of a mechanistic view of the universe where output depends on the interaction of physical forces. Saying that situations naturally tend to end well but that we are the reason they don't is against western education. This idea was actually presented in the 17th century by a German philosopher, Leibniz, but not surprisingly was dismissed. Still today we would not accept this since it does not allow us to blame something outside ourselves for what we don't have. For the west, this idea is seen as pessimistic. Saying that situations naturally tend to their best implies that everything we see is already at its best. The only reason they are not better is because they didn't have better inputs to work with. Since we all think we could be happier and richer this idea makes no sense at all to us. But this is a consequence of the western mind. For the west, our happiness and wealth are seen as the result of outside forces, so thinking that the outside forces are doing their best already when we are unhappy and poor sounds pessimistic. If we were in the east and thought that what we live is a projection of our thoughts, we would realize that we are not happier and richer because our mindset does not allow us to do so. If we acted in harmony with life we would naturally find happiness and wealth. Actually this eastern way of thinking is what gets all those self help books sold these days. In reality, they are just making promises with an eastern flavor.

Regarding the body as real and believing that we only live once is also logical. The entire western belief system comes from the single idea we are a body. Questioning this is the biggest defection of all. It is the most outrageous thing you can tell a westerner, that we are spiritual beings. Since this idea is so engraved in the west, people gravitate to the opposite side and decide to become spiritual by entirely disregarding the physical world; as if the rent was going to get paid by divine intervention without you having to do anything about it. Running away from the material world is not the lesson in the Gita. After the battle at Kurukshetra and the Pandava victory, Arjuna's brother becomes king. However, he keeps treating the blind Dhritarashtra as a king, and the two of them sign royal decrees together. The spiritual life, the Pandava view, does not entail disregarding the physical world, but acknowledging it without succumbing to it.

An interesting aspect of king Dhritarashtra, is that he is the recipient of the message of the Bhagavad Gita just as much as Arjuna is. While Krishna is talking to Arjuna in the battlefield, the seer Sanjaya is relating the events to Dhritarashtra at the palace. During the Bhagavad Gita all four characters – Krishna, Arjuna, Sanjaya and Dhritarashtra – talk at some point. Dhritarashtra is in the palace with Sanjaya while Krishna is with Arjuna at the battlefield. Dhritarashtra cannot see Krishna but does hear the full message that He is delivering.

In the Mahabharata, king Dhritarashtra does not oppose the Pandavas. He is good at heart and mourns his nephews when they are said to be dead. It was his intention to at least share the kingdom with them but it is his son Duryodhana who gets his way. Although Dhritarashtra has supernatural bodily strength, he is spiritually weak, always yielding to Duryodhana who feels entitled to be king and hates the Pandavas. These are the two characteristics of the system, weakness and entitlement. If push comes to shove, I'll take care of myself to keep the status that I have since I deserve it. This is what the system does. It protects itself in order to endure so backstabbing is completely justified when it comes down to survival. That is what the combination of weakness and entitlement will do. These two characteristics define the system and it is how we behave on important matters. We want to change and improve the system but when things get too tough or the outcome is uncertain, we pull back and let things stay the way they are. It is only when we think we have lost everything that we feel compelled to act. As long as we have something that we could lose we hold back and stay quiet. We are Dhritarashtra just as much as we are Duryodhana. We believe we are a body, we would take money over divine advice when faced with a challenge and we prefer to complain about what others are not doing instead of doing something ourselves. We are the system. Only a few are ready to take a risk and venture beyond the system's borders.

A very interesting character in the Kaurava side is grandfather Bhishma. Bhishma was one of the Vasus, deities representing natural forces, who is forced to incarnate as punishment for stealing Surabhi, the sacred wishing cow. Bhishma was born to the goddess Ganges and King Shantanu and grew up to become a great warrior and politician. He was considered to be the protector of the Kaurava army. Bhishma vows not to kill any of the Pandavas during the battle since they were very dear to him and he lets himself be killed by Arjuna in order to turn the tide of the battle to the Pandava side.

The presence of Bhishma tells us that the Kaurava side deserves divine protection. There is a divine reason for the Kaurava side to exist, meaning that the system is meant to be. The system provides an environment for us to grow. In return it asks us that we accept its rules. The system is where all of us start, whether we want to or not. This is symbolized by Arjuna's childhood, when he shared the palace with Duryodhana and all the Kauravas. We are born in a body, we don't remember anything and we depend on others for our sustenance. It is natural that our initial identification is with the body. The question is whether we can grow out of this delusion or not.

For some people life is about living in the system. Learning to live in it can be as much an evolutionary journey as actually fighting to leave it. On verse 18.67, Krishna tells Arjuna not to teach those who are not ready, "do not share this wisdom with anyone who lacks in devotion or self-control, lacks the desire to learn, or scoffs at me." This is as much for the teacher as for the student. Bhishma shows us that the

role of the Kauravas is as sacred as the one of the Pandavas. It is all a well designed ploy to help us along. Notice that Bhishma's role was of a protective nature while Krishna had an advisory one. Those in the system are not ready to reason so they need protection. The system hosts us while we are young, not yet ready for reasoning. Once we grow up we are ready to question our belief system so Krishna can explain how life really works. This is what Krishna is doing with Arjuna.

Another interesting character in the Kaurava side is Karna. Karna is the most fantastic warrior that ever existed and he is barely beaten by Arjuna in battle thanks to Krishna's help. Karna's genius symbolizes the weakness of the system. If Karna had fought on the Pandava side, the Kauravas would not have had a chance. This is how great of a fighter Karna was. But the most interesting fact about Karna is not his fighting skills, but that he was really a Pandava. He is brother to the Pandavas on their mother's side but he never reveals this fact. Krishna knows, talks to him before the battle, and they discuss how the Pandavas would share the kingdom with him since he is their older brother. However, Karna consciously decides to fight for the Kauravas knowing that he will die in battle to Arjuna.

Bhishma and Karna are spiritual beings that accept their roles to support the system. They represent the pure and virtuous qualities that keep the system moving despite its nature. Think of a large company, one slow to change and anchored in its old ways. Things get done in those kinds of companies despite their culture and their management, not because of them. Their ways are obsolete and obstructions to productivity. It is the tenacity, ingenuity and good intentions of a few that make these archaic companies keep moving. These qualities are what Karna represents. One must fight within the system, against the system but for the system to ensure that the system can endure. If the system was left to its own devices, it would not last a fortnight. The values defended by the system would make the house of cards implode, rotting from the inside out.

The last important character on the Kaurava side is Drona. Drona was the military instructor to both the Kauravas and the Pandavas. At Kurukshetra, Drona fought for the Kauravas. As a simple symbology we can see that the system will teach and prepare both sides, even the side that will eventually be the end of the system. But Drona's life makes this message even more dramatic.

Drona was friends with king Drupada but was very poor himself. He married and led a really modest life until he grew tired of it and visited his old friend Drupada, then already king. Drupada refused to mix with him since he was too poor so Drona went to the neighboring land of the Kurus. When he arrived, Arjuna and the other kids had dropped a ball in a well and Drona pulled it back with blades of grass by using them as darts and sticking one to the end of the previous one making a pole with the grass blades. When Bhishma saw that, he recognized Drona and offered him the position of royal military instructor to the kids. Once Drona prepared the Pandava and Kaurava kids, he sent them to kidnap his old friend king Drupada. Arjuna brought the king back to Drona and Drona took half of Drupada's kingdom, declaring himself king.

Drupada swore to kill Drona so he made sacrifices to the gods to have a child who could kill him. Out of the sacrifices he got Dhrishta. Although Drona knew that Dhrishta was meant to kill him, Drona trained the boy in the military arts. He did that because it was his dharma, his divine mission and obligation, even if it meant his own death. The same way, the system provides us with a training field where we can

learn and grow until one day we can change it. It is the system's dharma to teach us, even if that means that one day we will come and destroy it in order to create a new one.

On the Pandava side, Arjuna symbolizes the potential in all of us, the new perspective we should strive for. Throughout the Gita, Arjuna undergoes this transformation. In chapter one he would not attack his own family and by the end of the book he has accepted Krishna as God and is ready to comply with His request to fight. I am using capital letters because Krishna does not identify himself as a god, but as God; and this distinction is important in order to understand the transformation that Arjuna went through. Arjuna's devotion was to Life, to all of Life as a whole. That is what God with a capital 'G' represents. The correct course of action in his situation was to fight. Krishna not only convinces him to do so, but also teaches him to do it in a detached manner, so his actions are for the benefit of the whole.

Arjuna's point of view changed from focusing on the material aspect of the fight, killing a body, to the transcendental aspect of the situation, fulfilling his duty for the betterment of Life as a whole. This is what the war in the Gita represents and the role that Arjuna plays, the struggle that we have to go through to change our mindset from the physical to the transcendental. This is the spiritual war that Arjuna must undergo. For a warrior like Arjuna, being killed in battle translates into a ticket to heaven, as Krishna reminds him in chapter one. This death during battle is again symbolic. It is the death of our previous self, the one that held the previous beliefs in favor of the new person that we have become after the fight; a fight against ourselves. Obviously this death cannot be literal, or we would be killing our body. The body and mind are the battlefields, not the participants. Our selves, a higher one and a lower one, each with their own perspectives and understandings are the contenders. The higher self with its spiritual and beyond the body perspective is represented by Arjuna while the lower self with its animalistic nature is represented by the Kauravas.

Arjuna asked Krishna to drive his chariot to the middle of the battlefield so he could see the armies from there. He drives away from his own army into a middle point, a place where both sides can be seen objectively. With this gesture, Arjuna is putting himself in a position to assess his own army as well as the enemy's. From a middle point, he is capable of questioning his motivations as a Pandava and confront his role as a fighter. The middle ground is the place from which we can see things objectively. Being attached to our own ways will not lead to victory. Victory does not translate to being right, but to being wrong. We must realize that we have to leave our current belief system behind and acquire a new one. At the same time, we cannot follow anybody else's view. Our path to liberation is a walk that we must take alone, and we can find it somewhere between where we are today and where we see our enemy. Arjuna's placement between both armies is important. If we are looking for a transcendental view of Life, we need to tread with light feet onto a road that no one has traveled before.

In the Gita, Krishna defines how an enlightened person behaves. By doing this, Krishna defines our goal, our objective. While the goal is common to all of us, our current situation is unique. Our background, belief system and personal circumstances place us in a unique spot. It is this spot we must use as our starting point on our way to enlightenment. There is no need to wait for any special situation. We must start walking and creating the way as we go. This path does not really exist until we create it. We can follow what others tell us or avoid what others have done, but we must walk alone.

Those we understand to be our enemies are usually not far from us. In order to disagree with someone we must first agree on something. If there is no common ground there is no conflict. This is symbolized by the Pandavas and the Kauravas being cousins. Those we see as enemies are not that far from us. Coming to a middle point is not achieved by accepting the views of the opposing side but by departing from our own. The purpose of the enemy is to make clear to us that we are getting attached to something we should not. The goal is to achieve detachment from that which we deem right, not acceptance of that which we think wrong. In this sense, it was more important that Arjuna left his army to go to the middle of the battlefield rather than he approached the enemy's side. Our enemy is inside and that is where the battle should be fought.

Arjuna understood that the Kauravas were the system. In verse 1.40 he recognizes that "when a family declines, ancient traditions are destroyed. With them are lost the spiritual foundations for life, and the family loses its sense of unity." This verse tells us that in chapter one Arjuna was still part of the system. He would rather not fight and let things stay the same under an unjust and cruel king for the sake of keeping the unity of the group. He believed that if the system collapsed it would not be able to provide sustenance and protection to those who lived in it. Those are system views.

Krishna is taking the role of Shiva the destroyer, who does away with what is not useful. Krishna is ready to finish the current unfair monarch for the benefit of a change. He is ready to put the system at risk. This is an interesting point about the system as well. As reluctant as the system is to change, it has always been able to recover from every challenge that it has faced. Life does go on, and people adjust as needed. Civilizations have come and gone and we are still here. The system's reluctance to change comes from fear of the unknown and not from historical evidence.

Implicitly, the Gita is saying that if Arjuna had not accepted the message that Krishna had for him, he would not have won the war. Krishna, God himself, makes an enormous effort to convince Arjuna, going to the extent of showing him His true nature. Why would He make such an effort if it was not essential? Krishna is totally committed to convincing Arjuna to fight, and He does this by even explaining how the universe works. The fact that Krishna shared so much knowledge tells us that He deemed that course of action necessary. If Arjuna had dismissed Krishna's teachings, he would have lost the war. But Arjuna could not have seen that. He didn't really know what was at stake, only Krishna did. Arjuna's questioning of Krishna's message represents all the times that we question the messages that Life sends us. The fact that Krishna is ready to make such an effort to convince Arjuna tells us that we are an important piece of this puzzle we call Life. Our mindset is the key that will win the battle. Our mindset will determine the outcome of what will happen next in our lives. Only after Arjuna accepted Krishna's message was victory guaranteed.

Our lives are a consequence of our mindset, and the future scenarios we see in front of us are those that we accept as possible. In chapter one, the only possibility that Arjuna saw was the destruction of family. If he had won the war with that mindset, he would have expected family to be destroyed. He would have clung to every little detail that supported this view so his expectation would have come true. If Arjuna had won the war with his original mindset, nothing would have changed, and regardless of what contender had won, things would have stayed the same. What made the difference was Arjuna's new

mindset. The mindset was the key and the source of the change. Arjuna did not understand that but Krishna did. That is why he makes such an effort to teach the fighter the secrets of Life.

The final main character in the book is Krishna but he is so interesting that he deserves his own chapter.

Krishna

In simple terms, Krishna is God – with capital “G” – but this requires some explanation if we want to understand what the Gita means. When referring to Himself, Krishna says things like “I support the entire cosmos with just a fragment of my being,” verse 10.42, or in verse 15.18 we can read “I am the Supreme Self beyond the changing and the changeless.” So what does this mean?

In order to understand how Hindu philosophy describes the cosmos, we need to look at Sankhya philosophy. Sankhya is the philosophical side of yoga while yoga is the practical side of Sankhya. Sankhya sustains that the universe is the result of impersonal forces at work, which seems to clash with the view in the Bhagavad Gita which identifies Krishna as the one behind it all. In reality both views complement each other.

The word Sankhya basically means “a list.” Actually it is a list of tattvas (or as Easwaran translates, “suchnesses”). These tattvas are the components that make up the universe. Some of these tattvas are general and some are specific, some interact and some combine to create new ones. Sankhya sees the universe as the result of the interaction of these tattvas and there is no divine personality involved in this process of creation. All these tattvas are impersonal entities or suchnesses. On the other hand, the cosmology in the Gita is personal. Krishna is a person who is identifying Himself with God as the supporter of the universe. He is not saying that He is one of the multiple Hindu gods. He is saying that He is God with capital “G.” In verse 10.2, Krishna says “I am the source from which the gods and the sages come.” One may think that the impersonal Sankhya view conflicts with the personal view in the Bhagavad Gita but in reality they are in perfect harmony.

Sankhya makes a fundamental division of the universe into two main tattvas, purusha and prakriti. In the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, purusha is used to define our real nature and our universal role. In the context of the Gita, we can use purusha to pinpoint who Krishna is. Now, imagine the entire universe, everything, all the parallel universes, all time, past, present and future, everything, all of it; now add capital letters to it, ALL of it; everything that is, whether it is visible or invisible, EVERYTHING that has ever been, is or will be. The ALL. Pause to picture this concept in your mind. Now imagine that this ALL exists in someone’s head. Imagine the entire multiverse as a mental creation that takes place inside someone’s mind. The consciousness of the owner of this head is what Sankhya calls purusha. Purusha is just consciousness, no substance at all. It is pure consciousness. All matter, all of creation, visible and invisible, comes from prakriti. Prakriti is the source of all creation while purusha is the consciousness watching it. This is the basic premise of Sankhya and the Bhagavad Gita completes the picture. Krishna is this head that holds purusha, prakriti and all of creation. If there could be a definition of what God is, this would be it. Krishna is the God Head which holds the entire universe inside Himself.

This God truly supports the entire universe and all life. This God Head is the reason there is a universe in the first place. This God is calling Himself Krishna and He is the owner of purusha and prakriti. In verse 9.8 Krishna says that “controlling my prakriti, I bring forth these myriad forms and subject them to the laws of prakriti.” When we define Krishna as the owner of the head where all prakriti exists, He indeed can say “my prakriti.”

Obviously, there is no way of knowing if Krishna is a He or a She. It is impossible to know anything about this being. The Hindu religion sees Krishna as the masculine aspect of the divine while His consort, Radha, represents the feminine aspect. These representations go as far as considering RadhaKrishna to be a single person in which Krishna presents Himself in the form of Radha. This is how intertwined both aspects of the divine are for the Hindu tradition. For ease I'll keep referring to Krishna as a He.

What the Bhagavad Gita provides is a personification. Once we understand that Krishna represents the being who holds the entire universe inside Its being, it is easy to see how everything comes from It, or Him, or Krishna. The Gita is giving us a shape to relate to. Krishna is a character in the Mahabharata, but it is not until the Bhagavad Gita that we learn who He really is. That is the most wonderful concept that the Gita introduces. Chapter 12 starts with Arjuna asking Krishna who is more established in yoga, those who worship Him as an eternal formless reality, or those who worship Him personally. To this Krishna responds that those who worship Him directly with unfailing devotion are more established in yoga.

Krishna is giving us a personal representation of Himself so we can connect to it but at the same time He is symbolically pointing us towards the idea that the owner of this God Head is a being with whom we can establish a relationship. Krishna represents the God Head who holds the entire universe in Its mind. The owner of this Head in which the entire universe is happening is a being with whom we can connect and have a relationship. Krishna goes as far as telling us that He prefers that we deal with Him in this way. It is as if Krishna is telling us that He exists, that He is out there, and that He wants to have a conversation. He would prefer if we get to know Him personally rather than keep talking about Him as if He was some abstract concept beyond all we can know, which is actually how He looks from where we exist.

With this definition of who Krishna is, all the verses describing Krishna start making sense. "You are the Lord of all creation, and the cosmos is your body," verse 11.16; "You are the abode of the universe," verse 11.37; "...beyond this formless state there is another unmanifested reality, which is eternal and is not dissolved when the cosmos is destroyed" verse 8.20; "I pervade the entire universe in my unmanifested form. All creatures find their existence in me, but I am not limited by them," verse 9.4; "Those who worship other gods with faith and devotion also worship me... I am the object of all worship..." verses 9.23 and 24. No matter what god anyone worships, they are all a representation of the divine, and this ultimate divine is Krishna, so all worship to any god becomes an unknown worship of Krishna. Although all worship ultimately goes to Krishna, He does recommend that we worship Him directly. Verse 7.23 says "... those who worship the gods go to the gods. But my devotees come to me." Every god is a personal representation of the divine and based on what Krishna is saying, the one we choose will determine the results we get.

In verses 7.21 and 22 Krishna says that "when a person is devoted to do something with complete faith, I unify his faith in that. Then, when faith is completely unified, one gains the object of devotion..." We may be tempted to interpret this verse in line with the law of attraction, thinking that Krishna will help us get whatever we desire. This idea is actually against Krishna's advice. Krishna clearly recommends that we worship Him and nothing else. He asks that we put ourselves in His hands and let the universe take care of the rest. He explicitly asks that we do not desire anything besides being united with Him. That is what He wants to tell us when He says that "... those who worship the gods go to the gods. But

my devotees come to me” in verse 7.23. The life we are going to experience is determined by what we give our attention to. In the Gita, the term faith is used in the context of belief system. Chapter 17 is solely devoted to that. Krishna is telling us that we see what we want, that we interpret the world in a way that makes sense to us. If something is inexplicable, we ignore certain aspects so it fits within our current mindset and we can deal with it. By worshipping Krishna, we are putting ourselves in the hands of a higher power, or in the words of the Yoga Sutras, Ishvara-pranidhana. Ishvara-pranidhana is based on surrendering our will to the divine. Worshipping Krishna translates into surrendering our personal preferences or ego desires to a higher cause. When Krishna says worship me, he is saying “practice Ishvara-pranidhana.” Thinking that the universe is here to get us whatever our egos desire is a ludicrous idea to say the least.

When we have preferences and expectations we are telling the universe that we do not accept what it has in store for us and we prefer something else. These preferences come from our egos, so by asking us to worship Him, Krishna is trying to get us away from our ego’s desires. Eastern philosophy sees our lower self to be the cause of our afflictions, so by getting away from it we allow life to unfold naturally and in a positive manner. Worshipping Krishna or practicing Ishvara-pranidhana entails the acceptance of our situation and the implicit understanding that it is the best that could be happening to us right now. When practicing these principles we are putting ourselves in the hands of a higher power. This concept is quite foreign to the western mind and sounds more like a religious nut-head approach. For the east, this approach is simply letting the eternal dharma unfold in our lives as it is supposed to.

Worshipping the personal manifestation of Krishna would be a mistake. Krishna is usually depicted as a blue man – sometimes playing a flute – and in the Mahabharata he is cousin to Arjuna on his mother’s side; but that is not who He really is. In verse 7.24 He tells us that “Through lack of understanding, people believe that I, the Unmanifest, have entered into some form. They fail to realize my true nature, which transcends birth and death,” implying that He is not the blue man that appears in the Mahabharata. That is just a representation talking on behalf of the God Head. His true nature is beyond the form and the formless. The blue man is Krishna as much as you or I are.

Now that we know who Krishna is we can start deciphering His intentions based on His role in the battle at Kurukshetra. First, Krishna would not fight, but why would He? He is responsible for both sides. He will respect the process, but will reveal the truth to whomever is ready to listen. What makes Arjuna special is that he listened and considered what Krishna had to say. The spiritual person is the one ready to listen and then take the fight, the path of the transcendental war. The spiritual person is not the one that annuls the lower self. The lower self, represented by the confused Arjuna at the beginning of the Gita, must make an effort to listen to Krishna. The ability to listen is what makes Arjuna most special.

In the transcendental war we are fighting for our opponents as much as we are for ourselves. There are no sides from Krishna’s perspective. The battle at Kurukshetra represents the now within an eternal reality. At that moment, Arjuna had to fight his own family, although he is fighting for the whole of creation, including those that he was about to slay. When we follow our path in life and fight for what we believe, we have to fight the system, just like Arjuna did. What we must remember is that we are fighting for them as much as we are fighting for ourselves, otherwise our cause is not worthy.

The battle at Kurukshetra makes sense when seen in a universal context. This is what Krishna tries to do in chapter 2, quickly give a universal context to the situation. He is just trying to get Arjuna to fight so he does what needs to be done at that time. Krishna runs through a list of reasons to fight in order to get Arjuna going but that does not happen. This is why chapter 2 is seen as a summary of the Gita, because it briefly touches on many topics. When Arjuna still refuses to fight, Krishna makes a critical decision that gives us a lot of information regarding the role that Krishna wants to play in our lives. Since Krishna is God, He is as much in Krishna's body as He is in Arjuna's. Chapter 3 could have been something as simple as "Krishna touched Arjuna's forehead and the warrior understood. Then he fought. The End." But that is not what happened. Arjuna said that he would not fight, that he was not convinced, and Krishna respected that decision. Then, for sixteen more chapters, Krishna explains to Arjuna how the universe works, the mysteries of the cosmos, the ways to reach Him and He even reveals His full form in chapter 11. Krishna respected Arjuna's ignorance, indecision and confusion, just like we experience every day of our lives. Krishna is respecting the process of Life. If Krishna had imposed His view on Arjuna, the warrior would have never had the realizations he had. The journey that the Self has to take is more important than divine truth. That is how important our life is, that is how dear we are to Krishna. Our life with all its ignorance, fear and stupid decisions is important enough for God to let it be.

Remember that eastern philosophy regards the invisible world as real and the material world a created illusion. Krishna uses His prakriti to manifest the cosmos (verse 9.8). This view is consistent with Krishna's behavior. If Krishna had overtaken Arjuna's power of discernment and had made him see the spiritual truth behind the situation, Arjuna would have never been able to go through the experience of realizing the truth. The physical world, the ignorance and the fact that we forget everything as we are born are all a conscious decision and Krishna respects it by making an effort to convince Arjuna of His point of view. At the end of the day Krishna is God, so He is the one who set all this up. Incarnation, ignorance and the entire spectrum of the physical experience are all His doing. The reason for this is not discussed in the Gita but on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. The sutras describe the human being, the atman, as a singled out point of consciousness in the all, the Brahman, that allows the all to see itself from a unique point of view. Although Krishna does not explain this in the same detail as in the sutras, his behavior is consistent with this view. Krishna is protecting the integrity of Arjuna's experience by allowing him to make his own decisions. The higher Self does not force His view on the lower self because the intent of the higher Self is to have a pure experience through the lower self.

Although He does not explain it, He does point us in the direction of Sankhya a couple times throughout the book. For example, in chapter 10 Krishna describes Himself as the highest expression of accomplishment in every field. "Among the shining gods I am Vishnu," "...in living things I am consciousness," "...among the mountains the Himalayas," "among the weapons, the thunderbolt," verses 10.21-28. But the verse that points us towards the Sankhya philosophy is 10.26, "...among sages I am Kapila." Kapila Muni is the author of Sankhya. Although Sankhya is impersonal in its view of the universe, Krishna points us towards it, as if telling us to look at the Sankhya system if we want to understand Him.

What all these verses point to is hinted at in verse 10.20, "I am the true Self in the heart of every being..." Krishna is the fullest expression of everything that is. When our fullest expression shines

through we are expressing our divine self. Until then, it is the gunas acting on the gunas, as verse 3.28 states. "But the illumined man or woman understands the domain of the gunas and is not attached. Such people know that the gunas interact with each other, they do not claim to be the doer." What verse 3.28 means is that the body acts on auto-pilot. The body is the mechanism we use to experience the physical world. The body is not us. What we are is behind our physical expression, what the Gita calls the Self, which is ultimately Krishna. When our Self shines through our actions, we are taking control of our bodies. When we are not doing our best, it is the body on automatic pilot. This eastern view of the human being is quite encouraging but has important implications. The main implication is the principle of undoing, which the Yoga Sutras stress so much. Evolution is not achieved by acquiring something new but by getting rid of what is false (yoga sutra 4.1). The auto-pilot principles that the body operates under are what we must get rid of, and once they are removed, our true self just shines through.

Chapter 10 marks the turning point in convincing Arjuna to fight. This chapter is the first time Arjuna recognizes Krishna as a supreme deity. Then, in chapter 11, Krishna allows Arjuna to see His "most exalted, lordly form," verse 11.9. The main thing about this form is that it is not visible with physical eyes, so Krishna gives Arjuna "spiritual vision" (verse 11.8). The fact that Krishna had to grant this special vision upon Arjuna is meaningful as well. In verse 11.48, Krishna explains that this spiritual vision cannot be achieved "...by knowledge of the Vedas, nor sacrifice, nor charity, nor rituals, nor even by severe asceticism..." Organized religion, culture or external practices, no matter how severe they are, will not grant spiritual vision to the practitioner. Arjuna has a direct and personal relationship with Krishna. This is how he gets this vision and no formal channel can give him that. This point is important. Arjuna is having a firsthand relationship with Krishna. He is having the experience himself. There is no intermediary, and there is nobody that can grant him this spiritual vision besides Krishna Himself.

The direct experience or connection with the divine is a fundamental concept throughout the Gita but is best expressed in verse 2.46. "Just as a reservoir is of little use when the whole countryside is flooded, scriptures are of little use to the illumined man or woman, who sees the Lord everywhere." In this context Krishna uses the word yoga as union, talking about it as a personal experience. For example, verse 5.26 says "...those who follow the path of yoga and realize the Self are established forever in that supreme state." Realizing the Self is a personal experience, it is not something that someone else can do for us or can give us. Others can help us reach a place where this experience is possible, but the realization must be ours. Verse 2.46 is clearly giving more importance to clean intentions and a pure heart than to scholarly knowledge.

The vision that Arjuna gains in chapter 11, where he gets to see Krishna's "lordly form," scares him to no end. "I rejoice in seeing you as you have never been seen before, yet I am filled with fear by this vision of you as the abode of the universe," verse 11.45. What happened is that Krishna appeared to Arjuna "...with an infinite number of faces, ornamented by heavenly jewels...", verse 11.10, but Arjuna also saw "...[a] myriad [of] eyes and mouths, arms and legs, stomachs and fearful teeth, I and the entire universe shake in terror," 11.23, and "...all creatures rush to their destruction like moths into a flame," verse 11.29. Arjuna is realizing the full magnitude of creation. The universe is a life and death machine, "I am time, the destroyer of all," says Krishna in verse 11.32. Beings come to life and then die and both parts

of this cycle are shown to Arjuna. At the end of the chapter, the warrior asks Krishna to take his usual form back and Krishna complies. By then, Arjuna has already realized the true nature of Krishna and is ready to follow him.

END OF SAMPLE