

The Bhagavad Gita

A new poetic translation

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The Bhagavad Gita

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Preface

Two armies face each other, seconds away from mutual annihilation. Between them is parked a chariot. In the chariot are the renowned warrior, Arjuna, and his divine charioteer, Krishna. Having surveyed the two armies, and recognised that his kinsmen are ranged on both sides, Arjuna sinks onto the chariot's floor, so overcome with grief at the thought of the forthcoming slaughter and his role in it that he is unable to stand, let alone take up his bow and fight. Krishna looks down at his friend, then utters these indelible words:

You grieve for those who require no grief,
justifying yourself with false words of wisdom:
wise men mourn neither living nor dead.
For there was never a time when I was not,
nor when you nor these kings did not exist,
nor, hereafter, when we will cease to be.

In a few words the dramatic scenario of a doubting warrior is lifted from narrative poetry into the rarer reaches of mystical philosophy. Thus begins arguably the most eloquent disquisition on the immortality of the spiritual self in all world literature.

The *Bhagavad Gita* has been described as the jewel in the crown of the *Mahabharata*, the work in which it is embedded. The *Mahabharata* is fifteen times the length of the New Testament. It narrates the adventures of the five Pandu brothers, describing their exotic encounters with courtesans, villains, magicians, supernaturally-empowered men and women, and demi-gods and gods.

Set against this colourful background, the *Bhagavad Gita* is a tranquil pool, summarising the essence of Indian spirituality.

In eighteen discourses it presents an analysis of the nature of the self, of the cosmos and of the Divine, and maps the paths by which the self may disentangle itself from material existence, gain knowledge, and progress towards God-realisation. It is due to the way it explores humanity's spiritual possibilities that the *Bhagavad Gita* is considered not just the greatest of India's spiritual treatises, but one of the most profound texts in all world literature.

Precisely when the *Bhagavad Gita* was written is not known. Scholars agree it was likely written between the fifth and second centuries BCE. This places its composition during what has been termed the Axial Age, a period when a significant shift in spiritual outlooks occurred, when Gautama Buddha conceived his teaching, Pythagoras introduced philosophy to the Greeks, the Chinese sage Lao Tzu developed the concept of the Dao, and Indian meditators wrote the *Upanishads*.

The *Bhagavad Gita* made a powerful addition to this innovative period, contributing to the Axial era's shift from mythological thought towards more abstract ways of conceiving our spiritual connection to reality. The traces of this shift remain visible in the layers of the text, with numerous mythological figures identified alongside abstract philosophic ideas. Key to the latter is Brahman, in which God is conceived in transcendent terms. The poem also presents Krishna as a personalized form of that abstract God.

Who wrote the *Bhagavad Gita* is also not known. The *Mahabharata's* authorship is traditionally ascribed to Vyasa, the poet-sage named in the *Bhagavad Gita*, who is also said to be the author of the *Brahma Sutras*. It is possible Vyasa wrote the original text of the *Bhagavad Gita*, but as we know nothing about him except his name this remains conjectural. Where scholars are agreed is that the text we now possess is likely to have been written by various hands. Of the eighteen discourses, the earliest echo the language and thought of the *Upanishads* and Sankhya philosophy. The concepts of an entirely abstract God named Brahman, of purusha (spirit) and prakriti (matter), and of the gunas (the three fundamental tendencies of matter) date to before 200 BCE. One schol-

arly theory is that around this time a group who viewed Krishna as the embodiment of the divine may have added the emphasis on Krishna that runs through the poem. However, the artful weaving of the impersonal and personal aspects of deity through the poem mean it is difficult to make definitive statements regarding when and how it was composed.

Each discourse ends with colophon that describes the *Bhagavad Gita* as an *Upanishad*. In a literary sense, the *Upanishads* are those books in the *Vedas* (the oldest Indian spiritual writings) which expound the Indian spiritual philosophy and practice. Thus, the *Bhagavad Gita* may be considered the *Upanishad* of the *Mahabharata*. The title of each discourse varies between editions. Those used here were selected by Shri Muniji Maharaj.

This version of the *Bhagavad Gita* was completed in 1991, at the instigation of Shri Muniji Maharaj, during a three-month period I spent on his ashram in Rajasthan. I must admit that when Shri Muniji first suggested I create a new poetic version I was not convinced there was any need for it, as there already existed innumerable versions in English. I couldn't see the point in adding another. However, Shri Muniji was adamant. At that time the only poetic version was Sir Matthew Arnold's translation into Victorian verse, and the combined prose and verse version by Christopher Isherwood and Swami Prabhavananda. My aim accordingly became to create a version accessible to modern readers that avoided the stilted Victorianisms of Arnold's translation, and offered a complete version of the text in poetry. In 2008 I revised the text to make it more readable and added the glossary and notes. Since then a number of poetic versions have been published, each with different aims. Most notable are Stephen Mitchell's edited response to the text, and Barbara Stoller Miller's more accurate , who sought

I am not a Sanskrit scholar. Accordingly, Shri Muniji proposed that as a basic translation I use the literal word-for-word English transliteration provided by the staff of Kalyama-Kalpataru for Jayadaya Goyandka's *Srimad Bhagavadgita*, published by Gita Press. To

provide background knowledge, Shri Muniji gave me a copy of *The Gospel of Selfless Action*. This is a translation into English of Mahatma Gandhi's Gujarati version of the *Bhagavad Gita*, carried out by Gandhi's secretary, Mahadev Desai. Desai's notes were particularly useful to me, as they provide extensive background information, draw attention to key philosophic and spiritual concepts, and offer an ethical and philosophic context for readers approaching the poem from a Western perspective. Of course, many other translators also offer these contextual materials.

When writing a new version of an ancient poem, a central question is what style to use. I wanted the language to be precise, in order to convey the philosophic concepts as exactly as possible. I also wanted to convey a sense that the poem is a dramatic as well as philosophic dialogue, spoken on the cusp of war. I felt a degree of formality was required to achieve this balance. This meant free verse was not appropriate, while any rhyme scheme would require frequently disrupting the sense in order to fit words into a poetic pattern. I accordingly chose blank verse. It has been established since Elizabethan times as a powerful medium for writing dramatic dialogue, which is the *Bhagavad Gita's* literary genre. Avoiding a set stanza length also allowed the length of individual verses to be varied to fit what is being said. My aim is that the style of this version allows for an accurate reflection of the *Bhagavad Gita's* philosophic concepts while also conjuring something of its poetic power and majesty.

As I worked through the word-for-word transliteration, Shri Muniji suggested alternative English words wherever he considered a word I had selected was inconsistent with his knowledge of Sanskrit and his understanding as a yogic practitioner. I soon realised that it was necessary to leave a significant number of Sanskrit words untranslated. I did this first in the interests of intellectual precision. The Sanskrit text has many technical words for which there is no exact equivalent in English. It is also useful for readers to be reminded that much in this poem is foreign and unfamiliar: it was written 2,500 years old, and its conceptual outlook is naturally very different from our modern worldview.

As a result, there will certainly be many words, concepts and statements that on first reading make little sense. To help, I have provided a glossary to elucidate all Sanskrit terms, while notes explain the Indian mythological, religious and cultural references. Numerous extensive commentaries have been written on the *Bhagavad Gita*. My notes make no claim to be either exhaustive or authoritative; they are designed to elucidate the key characters and concepts that lie behind the text. In the notes on each discourse I have occasionally included my own response as a reader, but because my intention is to provide clarity for readers I have avoided offering my own interpretations. Many interpretations are available elsewhere. For the rest, if parts of the text remain mysterious—poetry naturally challenges us that way.

The *Bhagavad Gita* needs to be read in the context of its place in the *Mahabharata*. The following summarises the principal events that culminated in a civil war, on the brink of which the *Bhagavad Gita* is set.

There were once two princely brothers named Dhritarastra and Pandu. On the death of their father, the crown was supposed to be passed on to Dhritarastra, the eldest, but as he was blind Pandu became king instead. When Pandu died the crown was then passed to his eldest son, Yudhishthira. But Dhritarastra's eldest son, Duryodhana, found this unsatisfactory. Believing he was the rightful heir, he arranged a dice game by which he cheated Yudhishthira not only of his kingdom but of everything he and his brothers possessed. Naturally, the Pandu brothers—Arjuna amongst them—were upset at this, especially as Duryodhana had used supernatural means to ensure he won. After a period of argument Duryodhana struck a deal. The Pandus were to go into exile for twelve years, then hide incognito in the kingdom for one year more. During this time Duryodhana would rule. If, at the end of the thirteen years, the Pandus remained undetected, Duryodhana would surrender the crown and the Pandus would rule.

After many adventures, the Pandus successfully completed the task. But when they demanded the return of the kingdom,

Duryodhana, having acquired a taste for kingship, refused to surrender it. The Pandus consulted, decided their position was righteous, and declared war on Duryodhana and their other kinsmen, the sons of Dhritarastra.

With war inevitable, both Arjuna and Duryodhana approached Krishna, seeking his support. Duryodhana arrived first, and finding Krishna asleep, sat on a chair and waited. Arjuna arrived shortly after and took up a position of supplication at the foot of the bed. When Krishna awoke he thus saw Arjuna first.

The crisis was explained to Krishna, each imploring Krishna to take his side in the forthcoming conflict. Being related to both, Krishna said he would assist both sides. To one he would offer the services of his army, to the other himself, although he personally would not fight. As he had seen Arjuna first on waking, he gave Arjuna first choice. Arjuna chose Krishna, to have his wisdom to draw on during the conflict. Duryodhana was also pleased, as he had Krishna's large army.

The first day of the war arrived. Seated in his palace, the blind King Dhritarastra asked his minister, Sanjaya, what was happening. The sage Vyasa had offered to use his magical powers to restore Dhritarastra's sight for the duration of the battle, that he might witness it all himself. Not wishing to see the slaughter, Dhritarastra declined. Vyasa then gave Sanjaya magic sight so he could not only see what happened but also penetrate the hearts and minds of every participant, enabling him to recount to Dhritarastra everything thought, felt and done.

Thus we come to the moment at which the *Bhagavad Gita* begins. Alone in his palace with Sanjaya, Dhritarastra asks what is happening on the battlefield. It is on the wings of Sanjaya's response that the *Bhagavad Gita* soars.

Discourse 2

Sanjaya continued:

- 1 Then to Arjuna—sunk deep in sorrow,
heart awash, dark eyes with tears glazed—
Shri Krishna pronounced these words:

The Lord said:

- 2 How, at this imperilled time, have such strange
delusions engulfed you, which noble men
should shun, and lead to neither heaven nor fame?
3 Do not succumb to unmanliness, Arjuna.
It is dishonourable. Scorcher of enemies,
shake off this lowly faint-heartedness. Stand!

Arjuna responded:

- 4 Tell me, Krishna, how can I, with bow readied,
arrow cocked, kill both Bhishma and Drona,
who rather deserve my reverence than death?
5 Surely, I should rather live by begging than slay
these noble elders, for after their deaths
all my pleasures will be stained with blood.
6 I am blind. I cannot see which act is preferred:
to conquer them, or have them conquer us.
And Dhritarastra's sons, whom if we killed
I could no longer live, stand before us now!
7 My being is paralysed with faint-heartedness.
My mind gnaws at duty. I implore you.
I am your disciple, placed in your hands.
Tell me how to act, and where my good resides.
8 For if I won an earthly kingdom and wealth,

or even obtained dominion of the gods,
yet still I know I would suffer this grief
which numbs me and desiccates my senses.

Sanjaya said:

- 9 Thus spoke Arjuna to Shri Krishna, great King,
and with a last, "I will not fight!" fell silent.
10 Then, great Dhritarastra, between both armies,
as if to mock the anguished Arjuna,
Shri Krishna spoke the following words.

The Lord said:

- 11 You grieve for those who require no grief,
confusing yourself with words of false wisdom;
wise men mourn neither living nor dead.
12 For there was never a time when I was not,
nor when you and these kings did not exist,
nor, hereafter, when we will cease to be.
13 The embodied passes from infancy to death,
just so it enters another body;
the wise are not deceived over this.
14 Heat and cold, pleasure and pain, each arise
when the senses and their objects meet.
But they are transitory. Transcend them, therefore.
15 That man to whom pain and pleasure are the same,
who, Arjuna, by these remains undisturbed,
becomes a candidate for immortality.
16 Nothing can come to be from non-being,
nor can what has existence cease to be;
this reality is perceived by those who know.
17 Understand, that which extends throughout
the entire cosmos is imperishable;
indestructible, none can destroy it.
18 The embodied is immeasurable,
eternal, imperishable; its bodies
finite only. Therefore, Arjuna, fight!

19 Ignorance grips both he who thinks this kills,
and he who believes this to be killed;
for, in truth, this neither kills nor is killed.

20 This is not born, nor can it die,
nor does it only become after birth.
Unborn, eternal, everlasting and ancient,
when the body is destroyed, it is not slain.

21 Arjuna, who knows this to be unborn,
imperishable, immutable and eternal,
how and whom can he possibly slay?
How and whom will he cause to be slain?

22 As we discard our worn out garments
to take up fresh clothes, so the embodied
discards worn out bodies and enters others new.

23 This, no weapons wound; this, no fire burns;
water cannot wet it, nor winds dry it.

24 It cannot be cut, burnt, wet or dried out;
it is eternal, omnipresent, constant,
immovable and everlasting.

25 Imperceptible by the senses, to the mind
inconceivable, it is called unchanging.
Knowing this, you therefore should not grieve.

26 And, Arjuna, even if you think it is always
being born or dying, your grief is still misplaced.

27 Because death is certain for all who are born,
and birth assured for those who die—
and for the inevitable, you should not grieve.

28 Before birth all beings are unknown,
and at death become unknowable again;
they are known only between birth and death.
So what reason do you have to lament?

29 How many perceive the marvel which is this?
Who speaks of or hears the marvellous in this?
Yet how many know it even on learning this?

30 This cannot be slain which in any body dwells;
therefore, Arjuna, it is futile to mourn.

31 But your duty, too, must not be reneged,
 as righteous war for the warrior caste is good.
 32 Happy those warriors to whom unbidden war comes,
 for heaven's gates are thrown open to them.
 33 But shirk this righteous war, your honour is lost,
 your duty failed, and sin incurred for sure.
 34 Worse, the world will tell your disgrace forever,
 (for a well-famed man, death would be preferred),
 35 and the maharathas who now think you great
 will each despise you, thinking fear made you quit;
 36 while those who hate you will disparage your deeds,
 their words nothing but derision of you.
 What could be more disturbing than this?
 37 Die, and you gain heaven; a victor, the earth.
 Stand then, Arjuna, determined to fight!
 38 Viewing alike pain and pleasure, loss and gain,
 victory and defeat, prepare for this war.
 For in so doing, you will not incur sin.
 39 Thus, I have revealed the yoga of jnana.
 Hear from me now the yoga of karma;
 resorting to which you may shrug action's bonds.
 40 On this path no effort can be wasted,
 nor can there be divergent result;
 even little practice delivers you from fear.
 41 In this, Arjuna, the intellect is one-pointed;
 thoughts born without aim wander everywhere.
 42 Arjuna, the ignorant delight in
 the Vedas' letter, claiming none else exists.
 43 Driven by desire, heaven is their goal;
 their elaborate words merely describe
 rituals of many kinds, performed for power
 and pleasure, which have rebirth as their fruit.
 44 Attached as they are to power and pleasure,
 their minds, by such words, are carried far away.
 They lack a determined intellect
 through which the supreme goal is attained.

45 The three gunas are the Vedas' domain.
Transcend them, Arjuna, and the opposites too,
by thinking clearly, self-controlled and non-attached.

46 As a shallow well has no function when floods
pour in from every side, so that Brahman
who knows has no need for the Vedas' words.

47 Make action your realm, not action's fruit.
Do not let desire for rewards drive your actions;
yet neither become attached to inactivity.

48 Rather, renounce attachment. Practising yoga,
be even-minded in failure and success,
for equanimity is yoga itself.

49 Action is inferior to disciplined action;
seek refuge, therefore, in detachment of mind.
Wretched are they whose motive is the fruit.

50 The disciplined transcend good and evil acts,
so prepare yourself to practise this yoga,
for yoga consists of acting with wisdom.

51 Know that the wise, practising detachment
and renouncing action's fruit, are released
from birth's chains and attain the blissful state.

52 When your mind traverses delusion's morass,
you will become indifferent to voices
which pronounce on either the future or past.

53 When your intellect, not diverted by such words,
at last rests in steadfast concentration,
then you will achieve the practice of yoga.

Arjuna asked:

54 Krishna, how are the wise distinguished
whose minds in samadhi are firmly fixed?
How do those stable-minded speak, sit and move?

Shri Krishna replied:

55 Arjuna, he who rejects the mind's cravings,
and in atman alone finds satisfaction,

he is said to be established in wisdom.
56 Whose mind amid sorrows remains undisturbed,
whose longings for pleasure no longer exist,
who is free of fear, passion and anger,
that sage may be called established in wisdom.
57 He who lives this life devoid of attachment,
who good and evil neither joys in nor resents,
his knowledge is built on a sound foundation.
58 When, as the tortoise withdraws all its limbs,
so he withdraws the senses from their objects,
his knowledge is built on a sound foundation.
59 When the senses are starved, their objects disappear;
taste for them goes too when the Supreme is perceived.
60 For the senses are so rowdy they would
carry away even the wise seeker's mind.
61 With all these in check, the seeker should sit,
focused on me, his senses controlled;
that one may be called established in wisdom.
62 Brood on sense objects, attachments arise;
from attachments come desire; from desire, anger.
63 From anger springs bewilderment;
bewilderment breeds a memory confused;
from memory confused comes lack of reason;
and reason lacking leads to total destruction.
64 But the disciplined seeker, self well-controlled,
unaffected by craving or loathing,
among sense objects tranquilly moves.
65 Stable, serene, his sorrows all cease;
intellect withdrawn, his knowledge is secure.
66 But he whose intellect has no focus
neither understands nor seeks right knowledge;
right knowledge lacking, he has no inner peace;
and without inner peace, how can happiness be?
67 As wind bears away a boat on the water,
so must his discrimination be lost
whose mind is attached to the senses' objects.

68 Therefore, strong-armed prince, the knowledge
of he whose senses are restrained from
all sense objects is built on a sound foundation.
69 When it is night for all other beings,
the disciplined seeker is awake; what keeps
other beings awake, to that seer is night.
70 As rivers drain into the brimming ocean
yet leave the ocean undisturbed,
so the serene are not disturbed by desires,
unlike those who are brimming with wants.
71 That one achieves serenity who
renounces all desires, acts without craving,
and is free of ego and all sense of possession.
72 Arjuna, this is the state of Brahmanic oneness;
established in this, one conquers delusion.
And, at even the moment death strikes,
those who achieve it enter Brahman-nirvana.

Thus, in the dialogue between Shri Krishna and Arjuna, on the science of Yoga, part of the knowledge of Brahman, as sung by the Lord in the Upanishad called Bhagavad Gita, ends the second discourse entitled: The Yoga of Knowledge.

Discourse 11

Arjuna proclaimed:

- 1 By your grace you have spoken profound words,
revealing knowledge of the Supreme,
thanks to which my delusion is shattered.
- 2 For, lotus-eyed Lord, in detail from you
I have learned of the source and end of all,
and, too, of your imperishable glory.
- 3 But I long to perceive you in that form
you have just described, as Ishvara.
- 4 If, master of yoga, you think me able to see it,
reveal to me your glorious supreme form!

The Lord responded:

- 5 Regard, Partha, in hundreds, in thousands,
my manifold, diversely-shaped and coloured forms.
- 6 Arjuna, behold the Adityas, Vasus, Rudras,
the twin Ashwins and the Maruts,
and vast numbers more, never revealed before.
- 7 Perceive, Arjuna, as my body now,
the whole cosmos, animate, inanimate
and everything else you desire to see.
- 8 Yet, with your own eyes, you cannot see me;
therefore, divine sight I bestow on you.
Behold the divine glory of my yoga!

Sanjaya said:

- 9 Great King! Shri Krishna, master of yoga,
to Arjuna then revealed his supreme form.
- 10 Many-mouthed and multi-eyed, of manifold

wondrous attributes, hung with innumerable
celestial ornaments, and wielding
countless uplifted weapons of death,
draped in limitless garlands and vibrant cloths,
11 and wafting intoxicating perfumes;
wholly marvellous, it was the Lord's form,
infinite and cosmic, facing everywhere.
12 The brilliance of a thousand suns exploding
in the heavens together would still not equal
the splendour of that all-pervading Soul!
13 Arjuna perceived the entire cosmos,
wholly diverse, yet concentrated
in one form—the body of the God of gods.
14 Elated and awe-struck, hair on his skin bristling,
Arjuna bowed his head low to the Lord,
and with joined palms addressed him thus:

Arjuna said:

15 Lord, within your body all gods and hosts
of unique and wondrous beings I see:
crowds of rishis, Brahma on his lotus throne,
and writhing coils of celestial serpents.
16 I perceive numberless arms, bellies, faces
and eyes in endless forms surrounding me.
You are so great, cosmic Lord, that I see
neither your end, middle nor beginning.
17 Crowned, armed with massive discuses and clubs,
you flame like a blazing, effulgent sun,
so brilliant my sight is dazed, uncomprehending.
18 You are supreme and imperishable,
the goal of knowledge, the ultimate end of all.
You are the guardian of ageless dharma;
you are, I now understand, eternal Being.
19 You have neither beginning, middle nor end.
Your strength is unlimited; your arms countless;

your eyes the sun and moon; your mouth a fire
 so radiant it scorches the universe.
 20 Universal Soul, you fill the four directions
 between heaven and earth; seeing your
 frightening form, the three worlds quake in fear!
 21 Multitudes of gods are entering you.
 Some, awe-struck, have joined their palms in worship,
 while hosts of siddhas and maharishis chant
 and hymn you with melodious song.
 22 The massed Rudras, Adityas, and Vasus,
 the Sadhyas, twin Ashwins, Maruts and Manes,
 the Gandharvas, Yaksas, Asuras and siddhas,
 all these, amazed, gaze wondering at you.
 23 Dread Lord, on witnessing your colossal form—
 your many mouths and eyes, your immense arms,
 feet and thighs, your countless vast, bulging bellies,
 the terrible teeth in each gnashing jaw—
 all the worlds are terror-struck. And so am I!
 24 All-pervading Lord, you stretch past the sky,
 so radiant, so rainbow-hued, your mouths so gaping,
 your dazzling eyes so huge, I shudder within,
 and both my peace and self-restraint flee.
 25 I stagger from your frightfully gnashing teeth,
 my chilled heart rigid in my chest, reeling,
 as your mouths breathe flames like the fires of death.
 Be merciful, Lord of the gods, refuge of all!
 26 Dhritarastra's sons and serried ranks of kings
 I can see each being eaten by you,
 while Bhishma, Drona and Karna, and all those
 27 other great warriors of ours, fall headlong
 into the teeth of your terrible jaws;
 some from those teeth dangle, puny heads crushed.
 28 As rivers, in foaming torrents, rush into the sea,
 so these mortal heroes feed your flaming mouths.
 29 As moths, frantically flapping, plunge into the flame,

so these pour into your mouths to their deaths.
30 And you, with relish, swallow each of them,
tongues lapping on every fiery side.
Lord, you ignite the cosmos with your splendour;
you burn up all that is with your blazing brilliance!
31 Tell me who you are in such a terrible form.
I bow before you; be benevolent.
For, primal Lord, I wish to know your purpose.

The Lord replied:
32 Time I am, enflamed destroyer of the world,
about to devour all these people here.
Even without your sword, your enemies shall die!
33 Stand, therefore, and win repute;
defeat your foes and enjoy your kingdom.
These warriors are already slain by me;
Arjuna, you will become but an instrument.
34 Drona, Bhishma, Jayadratha, Karna
and these heroic warriors else—all of whom
I have already killed—go out and slaughter.
Do not fear. Victory is yours in battle. Fight!

Sanjaya said:
35 After hearing Keshava's exhortation, Arjuna,
still trembling in fear, joined his palms and bowed.
Again bowing, voice faltering, he spoke to Krishna.

Arjuna said:
36 Inner controller of all, it is right
that the cosmos exults and praises you;
demons, terrified, flee in all directions,
while hosts of siddhas devotedly bow to you.
37 And why, Mahatman, should they not bow?
You are far greater even than Brahma.
Eternal and immutable King of the Gods,

refuge of the cosmos, you are being,
 non-being, and that which transcends both.
 38 You are the primal god, the most ancient being,
 the last resting place of all which exists.
 You are knower and known, the supreme abode;
 you pervade the cosmos, Lord of infinite forms.
 39 You are Vayu, Yama, Agni and Varuna,
 and Shashanka, Prajapati and the Ancient, too.
 All hail to you; a thousand times, hail!
 Again and again, all hail to you!
 40 Lord of all, who is before and behind,
 all hail to you! Soul of the cosmos,
 you possess infinite potency and strength.
 Your power pervades all. For you are all!
 41 If, not recognizing your greatness, and thinking
 you only a friend, I ever in affection,
 or even negligence, have called, "Krishna!",
 42 "Yadava!", "Comrade!", or whatever else rudely
 I might have said in jest, resting or at meals,
 while alone or with others, if I said such to you,
 who are endless, I hereby ask your forgiveness.
 43 You are father of animate and inanimate.
 Revered guru of the whole world,
 in the three worlds none is equal to you.
 How, then, could any other be greater?
 44 Therefore, I prostrate my body to you,
 craving your grace, adored Lord of all.
 As father with son, as lover with beloved,
 as friend with friend, so should you bear with me.
 45 Joy fills me to have seen what none else has before;
 yet my mind is tormented by fear, too.
 Reveal again your glorious form.
 Be gracious, King of Gods, refuge of all.
 46 I wish to see you as you were before,
 crowned, with discuses and clubs in each hand.

Thousand-armed one, who embodies the cosmos,
in that four-armed form appear again!

The Lord responded:

- 47 Arjuna, from favour for you, by my yoga power,
I have shown my radiant, primal, infinite, cosmic form,
which none before you has ever perceived.
- 48 Not by the Vedas, sacrifice or by studying,
nor by gifts, rituals or strict austerities,
can I be seen in this world in such a form—
only by you, best of the Kurus.
- 49 At seeing this terrifying form of mine,
do not be baffled or disturbed; free of fear,
calm of mind, see me again in the form I was.

Sanjaya said:

- 50 So Shri Krishna pronounced to Arjuna,
and showed him again his four-armed form.
Then, resuming his gentle form,
the Mahatman soothed him, terrified once more.

Arjuna said:

- 51 Krishna, seeing again your benign human form,
I am returned to myself, composure regained.

The Lord concluded:

- 52 The form you have seen is difficult to view;
even the gods crave to perceive it.
- 53 Not by studying the Vedas, penance or charity,
nor even by sacrifice, can I be seen in this form.
- 54 Yet by one-pointed devotion, Arjuna, may I
in this form be seen, known, and attained to.
- 55 Who diligently performs his work for me,
is ever fixed on and devoted to me,
lives free of attachment, has enmity for none,
know that one alone, Arjuna, comes to me.

Thus, in the dialogue between Shri Krishna and Arjuna, on the science of Yoga, part of the knowledge of Brahman, as sung by the Lord in the Upanishad called Bhagavad Gita, ends the eleventh discourse entitled: The Yoga of the Vision of the Cosmic Form.

Notes on discourses

The *Bhagavad Gita* draws together diverse strands of Indian mystical thought and practice. Over the centuries scholars have disentangled the strands to better understand how they were woven together. The central strands of thought include:

- the metaphysical perspective of Sankhya philosophy;
- traditional religious beliefs expressed in the myths recorded in the Vedas;
- the concepts of karma and of escape from the cycle of rebirth;
- the identity of atman (self) with Brahman (God as Absolute);
- yogic practices which provide the foundations for Indian mysticism.

What makes the *Bhagavad Gita* unique is the way its writers have combined these strands into a coherent spiritual and metaphysical outlook. Conversely, the diversity of sources also results in divergent, even contradictory, perspectives. For example, some verses (17:24) state that worshippers need to act according to the religious injunctions of the Vedas, while others (2:42-46) assert that the wise have no use for religious worship. In some verses (18:45) the poem advocates for the caste system, saying caste duties need to be carried out; elsewhere (9:20-21) it says that attachment to religion, caste and social differences stop seekers from becoming wise. Most of the poem is written from a warrior perspective, however the last three discourses emphasise priestly practices and outlook. Throughout, the poem presents Krishna as a form of God to be worshipped, yet it is equally firm all forms must be transcended.

Naturally, these multiple conceptual strands have led to the poem being interpreted from a wide variety of perspectives. Yo-

gis, religious worshippers, Sanskrit scholars, philosophers, ascetics, literary critics and readers who know little about Indian spirituality, each find material in the poem that supports their outlook. Hence while Gandhi drew inspiration from the *Bhagavad Gita* when he constructed his political strategy of non-violent resistance, the poem eulogises the warrior approach to life and ends with Krishna exhorting Arjuna to enter the battle and kill his kinsmen.

This demonstrates there can be no single definitive interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*. It is a kaleidoscope that changes according to the angle from which it is viewed. Indeed, thoughtful readers will find that with successive readings, and as their own experience and understanding develops, some aspects of the poem come into prominence while other portions previously as significant fall away. The complexities of the text, and the subtleties of its thought, require the reader to approach it creatively, projecting themselves and their own spiritual search into the poem in order to extract the most from it.

The following notes are offered with two primary aims. One is to explain the poem's religious, mythological and historical references. The other is to draw attention to key spiritual concepts. My notes are a modest contribution to the vast volume that has been written about the *Bhagavad Gita*, Non-technical, they are primarily designed to provide an entrance into the text for those who are unfamiliar with Vedic mythology and Indian philosophy.

DISCOURSE ONE

The literary purpose of the first discourse is to take the reader from the story-telling mode of the *Mahabharata* and into the poem's abstract, philosophic mode. Some scholars consider that the poem's style indicates the *Bhagavad Gita* was added to the *Mahabharata* after the larger work was completed. Conversely, others maintain both were written at the same time.

Dramatically, the first discourse introduces the warriors lined up to do battle. It then swiftly moves on to focus on Arjuna.

Arjuna's problem is that despite being a warrior, and despite it being his duty to fight, he cannot help but consider the death and destruction the battle will bring about. This thinking leads him to declare to Krishna that, no matter how right his cause, he will not fight. Arjuna's moral dilemma presents Krishna with the opportunity to present a wide-ranging philosophical and spiritual discussion regarding duty, action, whether or not the self actually dies, and the nature of Brahman which underpins all reality.

Comments on particular verses follow. A point to note is that Krishna exhorts Arjuna to fight on the grounds that all the warriors he is worried about are already dead. In the following I have described their future deaths to illustrate Krishna's assertion.

- 1 The battle took place on the field of Kuru, which was situated in what is now East Punjab, north of Delhi. The field is named after King Kuru, common ancestor of both families, whose home it was. The field is sacred because of the austerities he and others performed there.
- 2 Drona taught the arts of war, and particularly archery, to both sets of cousins. During the battle that is to follow he heard a report that his son had died. He immediately sat down and entered a state of meditation. While doing so Dhirstadyumna killed him by cutting off his head. Moreover, the report of his son's death was false.
- 3 Dhirstadyumna was commander-in-chief of the Pandu's army. Before he was born his father, Drupada, offered a sacrifice, seeking a son to slay his hated enemy, Drona. Dhirstadyumna is that son. Clever, he tricked Drona into teaching him how to become a great warrior. He later used those skills to kill Drona.
- 4 Arjuna and Bhima were the third and second oldest of the Pandu brothers. Their mother was Kunti. Satyaki was a disciple of Arjuna. He survived the Mahabharata war, but died in an inter-tribal skirmish soon after. Virata gave the Pandus refuge during their year of incognito existence within the kingdom. He and his three sons died in the war. Maharatha was the highest military title. Myth says such a warrior

- can fight 10,000 warriors single-handedly. Drupada was the father of Dhirstadyumna and sworn enemy of Drona, who killed him during the war.
- 5 Dhristaketu, the king of the Chedis, was killed by Drona. Chekitana was a maharatha and commander of a one-seventh section of the Pandu's army. Kasiraja was a hero and a maharatha. Purujit was uncle to the three oldest Pandu brothers. Saibya was the father-in-law of Yudhishtira.
 - 6 Yudhmanyu and Uttamaujas were brothers who guarded the wheels of Arjuna's chariot during battle. They were killed by Ashwatthama one night, as they slept. Subhadra was Arjuna's second wife, sister to Krishna. Draupadi was the daughter of Drupada, sister of Dhirstadyumna, and common wife of the five Pandus, by each of whom she had one son. All these sons were killed by Ashwatthama as they slept.
 - 8 Bhishma was Krishna's brother and commander-in-chief of Duryodhana's army. While young he undertook a vow of celibacy in order to enable his father to marry. Mortally wounded during the Mahabharata war, he lay on a bed of arrows for eighty-three days, waiting for a propitious time to die. Karna was Kunti's son, conceived by the sun god. After Drona's death Karna became commander-in-chief of Duryodhana's army. This role lasted just two days, ending when Arjuna killed him. Kripa was brother-in-law of Drona. He was proficient in the Vedas and a master of archery. Myth says he not only survived the war, but is still alive today. Ashwatthama was Drona's son. He was a maharatha whom legend says is also still living. Bhurishava was a maharatha killed by Satyaki. Vikarna was a maharatha and one of Dhritarastra's one hundred sons. Some commentators consider that the participation of all these warriors indicates this was not a local war, but involved all India. Others argue it was indeed a regional war, as demonstrated by the fact two branches of one family were responsible for the war occurring at all.
 - 11 *But guard Bhishma, for then will be no surprises.* Drupada's son, Shikhandhi, had been born female, but was later transformed