

Other Books in the

SkyLight Illuminations Series

- The Art of War—Spirituality for Conflict: Annotated & Explained*
Chuang-tzu: The Tao of Perfect Happiness—Selections Annotated & Explained
Confucius, The Analects: The Path of the Sage—Selections Annotated & Explained
Dhammapada: Annotated & Explained
The Divine Feminine in Biblical Wisdom Literature: Selections Annotated & Explained
Ecclesiastes: Annotated & Explained
Embracing the Divine Feminine: Finding God through the Ecstasy of Physical Love—The Song of Songs Annotated & Explained
The End of Days: Essential Selections from Apocalyptic Texts—Annotated & Explained
Ethics of the Sages: Pirke Avot—Annotated & Explained
Chazali on the Principles of Islamic Spirituality: Selections from Forty Foundations of Religion—Annotated & Explained
The Gospel of Thomas: Annotated & Explained
Hasidic Tales: Annotated & Explained
The Hebrew Prophets: Selections Annotated & Explained
The Hidden Gospel of Matthew: Annotated & Explained
The Infancy Gospels of Jesus: Apocryphal Tales from the Childhoods of Mary and Jesus—Annotated & Explained
The Lost Sayings of Jesus: Teachings from Ancient Christian, Jewish, Gnostic and Islamic Sources—Annotated & Explained
The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius: Selections Annotated & Explained
Native American Stories of the Sacred: Annotated & Explained
Perennial Wisdom for the Spiritually Independent: Sacred Teachings—Annotated & Explained
Philokalia: The Eastern Christian Spiritual Texts—Annotated & Explained
The Qur'an and Sayings of Prophet Muhammad: Selections Annotated & Explained
Rumi and Islam: Selections from His Stories, Poems, and Discourses—Annotated & Explained
The Sacred Writings of Paul: Selections Annotated & Explained
Saint Augustine of Hippo: Selections from Confessions and Other Essential Writings—Annotated & Explained
Selections from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna: Annotated & Explained
Sex Texts from the Bible: Selections Annotated & Explained
Spiritual Writings on Mary: Annotated & Explained
Tao Te Ching: Annotated & Explained
The Way of a Pilgrim: The Jesus Prayer Journey—Annotated & Explained
Zohar: Annotated & Explained

Bhagavad Gita

Annotated & Explained

Translation by
Shri Purohit Swami
Annotation by
Kendra Crossen Burroughs

Foreword by Andrew Harvey

Walking Together, Finding the Way®
SKYLIGHT PATHS®
PUBLISHING
Woodstock, Vermont

Much appreciation to Karen Ready, Thomas J. Hickey, and Jonathan Burroughs for suggestions and encouragement, and to Dave O'Neal for the wonderful opportunity.

Bhagavad Gita:
Annotated & Explained

2014 Quality Paperback Edition, Sixth Printing

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information regarding permission to reprint material from this book, please mail or fax your request in writing to SkyLight Paths Publishing, Permissions Department, at the address / fax number listed below, or email your request to permissions@skylightpaths.com.

Foreword © 2001 by Andrew Harvey
Annotation and introductory material © 2001 by Kendra Crossen Burroughs

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bhagavadgītā. English

Bhagavad Gita : annotated & explained / translation by Shri Purohit Swami; annotation by Kendra Crossen Burroughs ; foreword by Andrew Harvey.

p. cm. — (Skylight illuminations)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-1-893361-28-7 (quality pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-893361-28-4 (quality pbk.)

I. Purohit, Swami, 1882– II. Burroughs, Kendra Crossen. III. Title. IV. Series.

BJ1138.62 E5 2001

294.5'924047—dc21

2001001184

ISBN 978-1-59473-322-2 (eBook)

10 9 8 7 6

Manufactured in the United States of America

Cover Design: Walter C. Bumford III

Cover Art: Krishna embracing Gopa Kumar, detail from *Enter the Spiritual World* by B. C. Sharma, copyright © 2000 Mandala Publishing Group / B. C. Sharma. Used with permission.

SkyLight Paths Publishing is creating a place where people of different spiritual traditions come together for challenge and inspiration, a place where we can help each other understand the mystery that lies at the heart of our existence.

SkyLight Paths sees both believers and seekers as a community that increasingly transcends traditional boundaries of religion and denomination—people wanting to learn from each other, *walking together, finding the way*.

SkyLight Paths, "Walking Together, Finding the Way," and colophon are trademarks of LongHill Partners, Inc., registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

Walking Together, Finding the Way®

Published by SkyLight Paths Publishing

A Division of LongHill Partners, Inc.

Sunset Farm Offices, Route 4, P.O. Box 237

Woodstock, VT 05091

Tel: (802) 457-4000 Fax: (802) 457-4004

www.skylightpaths.com

You are the greatest book that ever was or ever will be, the infinite depository of all that is. Until the inner teacher opens, all outside teaching is in vain. It must lead to the opening of the book of the heart to have any value.

—Swami Vivekananda

Contents

धृतराष्ट्र उवाच
धर्मक्षेत्रे कुरुक्षेत्रे समवेता युयुत्सवः ।
मामकाः पाण्डवाश्चैव किमकुर्वत संजय ॥१॥

संजय उवाच

दृष्ट्वा तु पाण्डवानीकं व्यूढं दुर्योधनस्तदा ।
आचार्यमुपसंगम्य राजा वचनमब्रवीत् ॥२॥
परशैलां पाण्डुपुत्राणामाचार्य महतीं चमूम् ।
व्यूढां द्रुपदपुत्रेण तव शिष्येण धीमता ॥३॥
अत्र शूरा महैष्वासा भीमार्जुनसमा युधि ।
युधामाનો विराटश्च द्रुपदश्च महारथः ॥४॥
धृष्टकेतुश्चेकितानः कारिराजश्च वीर्यवान् ।
पुरुजित्कुन्तिभोजश्च शैब्यश्च नरपुंगवः ॥५॥
युधामन्युश्च विक्रान्त उत्तमौजाश्च वीर्यवान् ।
सौमद्रो द्रौपदेयाश्च सर्व एव महारथाः ॥६॥
अस्माकं तु विशिष्टा ये तान्निबोध द्विजोत्तम ।
नायका मम सैन्यस्य संज्ञार्थं तान्ब्रवीमि ते ॥७॥
भवन्भीष्मश्च कर्णश्च कृपश्च समितिंजयः ।
अरवत्यामा विकर्णश्च सौमदसिस्तथैव च ॥८॥
अन्ये च बहवः शूरा मदर्थे त्यक्तजीविताः ।

The opening lines of the Bhagavad Gita in Sanskrit

- Foreword by Andrew Harvey ix
About the *Bhagavad Gita* xv
About the Translation and Annotation xxi
1. The Despondency of Arjuna 2
 2. The Philosophy of Discrimination: Samkhya Yoga 10
 3. The Path of Action: Karma Yoga 24
 4. The Path of Wisdom: Jnana Yoga 32
 5. The Renunciation of Action 42
 6. Meditation and Self-Control: Dhyana Yoga 48
 7. Knowledge and Experience 58
 8. The Supreme Spirit 64
 9. The Sovereign Secret 70
 10. The Divine Manifestations 78
 11. The Cosmic Vision 86
 12. The Path of Love: Bhakti Yoga 98
 13. Matter and Spirit 104
 14. The Three Qualities 112
 15. The Lord God 118
 16. The Divine and Demonic Civilizations 124
 17. The Threefold Faith 130
 18. The Spirit of Renunciation 136

Notes	152
Suggested Readings and Resources	159
List of Special Terms	163
Credits	165

Foreword

Andrew Harvey

When I was twenty-five I left England and the plush but sterile academic life I was leading there to wander for a year around India. During that year I found myself living in Pondicherry at the ashram of Sri Aurobindo, where, with awe and amazement, I read the *Bhagavad Gita* for the first time, and where I was lucky enough to find in an old ashramite, whom I shall call “Mr. Bannerjee,” the ideal first guide to its mysteries. Every morning at dawn for a month Mr. Bannerjee, immaculate, wizened, screechy-voiced, clothed in blazing white, and seated in the lotus position, took me through the *Gita* in the Sanskrit, translating as he went, with baroque exuberance.

On our first meeting he gazed solemnly at me and said, “There are four things you must not forget when it comes to understanding the *Gita*. The first is that, although it is considered the spiritual masterpiece of Hinduism, its message is timeless and universal and transcends all religion. Note here too, by the way, that ‘Hinduism’ is itself a name imposed on a whole slew of different cults and faiths by the Greeks who followed Alexander the Great into India. The essence of all of these philosophies—and of religious life itself—is found in the *Gita*.”

“The second thing you must remember if you are ever to pierce the mystery of this spiritual masterpiece is this: The dialogue it enshrines between the divine avatar Krishna and the soldier Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra is always taking place within the heart and soul of every

human being on the battlefield of this terrible and beautiful world. Each one of us contains the doubling, despairing, potentially brave and illumined human being (Arjuna) and the mystery of Krishna (the eternal Divine Self) hidden behind all the veils of our psyche and mind. What the Gita does is dramatize in the most inspired way imaginable and for all time the full truth of this dialogue and the initiation it can make possible into full human divine life.

"The third thing that will help you approach the Gita's mystery with wisdom is to know that you cannot read it as a 'text' or even as a great and sublime mystical poem only. You must approach it slowly, reverently, bringing to your reading of it the whole range of your inner and outer experience and all of the pressing, disturbing questions of your life and search. Only then will the Gita be able to enter your blood and work its holy magic in the core of your being.

"The fourth and last thing that will open to you the doors of the Gita's splendor is to forget all the academic and religious arguments about which of the different 'yogas' or 'ways of divine union' it celebrates. Different schools bias the interpretation of the text to their own vision. The full truth is that the Gita embodies and celebrates a permanently radical fusion of all the traditional Hindu approaches to the Divine in a vision of what the full human divine being should and must be. These different yogas are in the Gita fused into a vision that combines and transcends them all to offer human beings the richest and most complete way of being and acting in the world with divine truth, wisdom, and effectiveness."

In our last class, four marvelous, wild weeks later, Mr. Bannejee added a fifth prerequisite for reading the Gita: "Always read the *Bhagavad Gita* as if it had just been written and as if it were referring to what is going on in the world right now. If you do, you will find that its power to initiate and inspire is constantly astounding. The Gita was probably written more than two thousand years ago; each different cycle of world civilization will find in it new truth, expressed with permanently fresh urgency."

Now that I have been graced with the chance to introduce others to this masterpiece, I must take up Mr. Bannejee's challenge and try to express as succinctly as I can what the Gita is saying to me and other seekers, now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Its message, I believe, could not be more urgent, or more relevant to the deepest problems and challenges facing humanity.

I believe that the whole of humanity is now in the thick of a battle whose outcome will determine the fate of the planet. This battle is between those forces of Life that want to see us living in harmony with the creation, inspired by divine love, and so able to re-create our devasted world with the powers of the Divine itself, and the forces of death—of ignorance, pride, and greed—that have brought us to the moment where we have almost destroyed Nature and polluted the world's mind and heart with violence and a materialist vision of humanity. The destiny of this vision is so reductive that it threatens us all with despair and meaninglessness at a moment when hope and resolve are crucial. This tremendous battle is being fought out in every arena of our life—in politics, industry, the arts, the sciences, the universities, the media, and in the depths of all of our psyches.

The signs are not encouraging. We have known about the progressive degradation of the environment for more than twenty years now, but almost nothing significant has been done to counteract it. Two billion people are now living in poverty, yet our addiction to an economic system that thrives on such desolation continues unabated. Much of organized religion continues to be largely divisive, drunk on outmoded visions of exclusive truth, and wedded to a vision of the Divine that obsessively restricts transcendence at this moment when the entire immanent body of God-Nature is in mortal danger. The majority of modern seekers in the so-called New Age who pride themselves on participating in a mystical renaissance are in fact largely trapped in a narcissistic coma, apolitical, unconcerned by and blind to the approaching potentially terminal tragedy of the destruction of nature.

Despair, however, is a luxury those who are growing awake in this darkness cannot afford; all those who see the extent of the potential danger and tragedy threatening humanity and nature are compelled to respond with the deepest of themselves. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, those who long to know how to fight wisely for the future will find a handbook of spiritual warriorhood and divine realization that will constantly inspire and ennoble them and infuse them with divine truth and sacred passion.

It is clear, I think, to anyone who sees the depth of the global predicament we are in that there can only be one way out now—the way out of “mystical activism.” An activism that is not fed by mystical wisdom and stamina will wither in the fire of persistent and persistently exhausting disappointment and defeat and tend to create as many new problems as those it tries to solve. A mysticism that is not committed to action within the world on behalf of the poor, of the oppressed, and of nature itself condemns itself to futility at a moment when so much is at stake. Only the highest spiritual wisdom and tireless sacred passion for all of life united with pragmatic, radical action on all possible fronts can now help us preserve the planet. The *Gita* can guide us to this all-transforming fusion of vision and action because, with the Gospels, it is the most wise and challenging celebration of it.

This, then, in plain language, is what I believe is our “inner Krishna’s” message to each of us now, as expressed in the *Gita*: First of all, like Arjuna, face the truth of the battle that rages on all sides in the world; do not indulge in despair, and claim your own spiritual warriorhood.

Second, realize as quickly and as completely as possible your divine identity and origin through whatever way of divine union your temperament opens up to you—whether it is of knowledge or of devotion. Only such an experience of the Divine in and as you will give you the calm, fearlessness, strength, and detachment you will need to be focused, effective, and undeterred.

Third, understand fully and finally the necessity of surrendering your will and the fruit of your actions wholly to the Divine. There are two rea-

sons why this is essential. Total surrender of your will and actions will enable the Divine to use both for its own transforming purposes without the interference of your false self and its mind-concocted agendas. It will also give you direct access to the Divine’s own timeless resources of inner peace and inexhaustible sacred passion, which will enable you to stay true to your purpose and your mission whatever defeats or disappointments happen along the way. Through this surrender to God of your will and of the fruits of your actions, become a poised and perfect instrument of the Divine’s own sacred plan for humanity, and whatever you do will be the Divine acting in you and through you—thus, far more useful and transformative than any other form of action, however well intentioned or “inspired.”

Fourth, when you have really absorbed the lessons of this wisdom of surrender, understand with your whole being that it is not in the end austere or harsh. In fact, it will open to you, as the last wonderful pages of the *Gita* reveal, a final mystery of divine love that will fill your whole being with a permanent sober ecstasy—an ecstasy that arises from the awareness that you and all beings are loved by God with deathless and unconditional love. And this ecstasy will unveil to you and in you the fullness of your divine humanity.

If you fuse knowledge of your transcendent origin with tireless service in and for God in the ways the *Gita* makes plain to you, you will come, on earth and in this body, to know divine bliss and be fed by the ceaseless passion-energy of divine love. Human and divine, inner peace and outer action, knowledge and love, will be married in you at ever-greater depths to make you an ever more powerful and radiant warrior for Love and Justice in all dimensions.

The message of the *Gita* is one of perfect spiritual balance. It challenges fundamentally both those materialist visions that think of humanity and the universe in purely scientific or practical terms and those religious visions of the Divine that see the world as imperfect or merely an illusion. If we listen to this message both in its complexity and in its

urgency, we will come to the wonder, bliss, and empowerment of Arjuna himself at the end of this "Song of God." And with more and more of us empowered in this calm and glorious way, the future of our world will, at last, be in wise hands.

*I dedicate this introduction to my friend
and spiritual warrior, Clarissa Pinkola Estes.*

About the Bhagavad Gita

The best-loved of all Indian scriptures is the *Bhagavad Gita*—often called simply the Gita ("song"). In English its title might be rendered as "Song of the Blessed One" or "Song of the Adorable One." The Adorable One is Lord Krishna, who is God in human form, and the Song is his teaching to humanity.

What the Gita Is About

The teaching of the Gita emerges from a battlefield conversation between Lord Krishna and the warrior-prince Arjuna. The war—which is said to have taken place in India about five thousand years ago—is between two royal families, the Kauravas ("descendants of Kuru") and the Pandavas ("sons of Pandu"). The long story of how this conflict came about is told in the *Mahabharata*, India's vast national epic, of which the *Bhagavad Gita* is the sixth chapter.

The Kauravas are the "bad guys," who deprived their cousins the Pandavas of their rightful kingdom. The Pandavas enter the fight only after their efforts at compromise have failed. Even Krishna—a cousin of the Pandava princes—could not make peace with the evil Kauravas. Krishna would not fight, but he offered Duryodhana, chief of the Kaurava army, a choice between his presence and his army. Duryodhana chose the army, so Krishna granted his presence to the Pandavas by serving as Arjuna's charioteer.

The narrative opens with the blind king Dhritarashtra (father of one hundred sons, the Kauravas), in his palace, asking his minister Sanjaya to tell him about the battle. Through supernatural perception (granted by

Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata*, who also appears in the epic as a grandfather of the Pandavas), Sanjaya describes the scene taking place on the distant battlefield. As fighting is about to begin, Arjuna asks Krishna to draw up their chariot between the two armies so that he may survey them. As he views his opponents, Arjuna is suddenly overcome with despair at the prospect of killing his own relatives, friends, and mentors. Realizing the terrible consequences of war, the great archer casts down his bow and arrow, unwilling to fight. The rest of the Gita is Krishna's teaching in response to Arjuna's anguish.

After the *Bhagavad Gita* is concluded, the *Mahabharata* goes on to tell how Krishna leads the Pandavas to victory in a battle between divine and demonic forces that lasts for eighteen days. Krishna as the divine incarnation, or Avatar, has succeeded in rekindling the torch of Love and Truth on the eve of a new world-age—the degenerate period known as the *kali yuga* in which we find ourselves today.

Who Wrote the Gita?

According to Hindu tradition, the author of the *Mahabharata* (including the Gita) was the sage Vyasa, whose name means "compiler." He is said to have also compiled the Vedas, ancient texts based on revelations received by various seers (*rishis*) while in a superconscious state. Thus, although the Gita is officially classed among the texts known as "traditions" (*smriti*, "remembered" knowledge), it has attained the status of a divine revelation (*shruti*, "heard" knowledge that is eternally existent), similar to the Vedas. The Gita is sometimes also called an Upanishad, the term used for mystical writings that convey the "hidden meaning" of the Vedas concerning the true goal of life and how to attain it. If the Upanishads are the cream of the milk of the Vedas, then the Gita is said to be the butter churned from the cream. The philosophy based on the Upanishads is known as Vedanta, and the *Bhagavad Gita* has been deemed "the best authority on Vedanta."

Contemporary secular scholars consider Vyasa to be a legendary figure and not the literal author of the Gita. They date the composition of the

Mahabharata to sometime between the fifth and second centuries BCE and believe that the Gita was added to the epic at a later time. To account for apparent discrepancies in the text, such scholars attribute the *Mahabharata* to several different authors. In terms of chronology, one ordinary human being could not have literally written both the Vedas and the *Mahabharata*. Tradition nonetheless regards Vyasa as a single individual, although not an ordinary human being. According to some authorities, the name of a *rishi* designates not only a specific individual but also a characteristic state of consciousness, along with its functions, which is shared by different historical figures who may bear the same name in the literature. Regarded in this light, the attribution of the *Bhagavad Gita* to Vyasa is more understandable.

The Language of the Gita

The *Bhagavad Gita* has been translated into all the major languages of the world—as well as some minor ones, including Yiddish. The original text was written in Sanskrit, the ancient language of India in which the Hindu scriptures and a vast body of poetry and literature were composed. Technically a "dead" language, Sanskrit is currently spoken only by Vedic scholars, known as pandits, and a small group of revivalists. It is, however, the ancestor of modern Indian languages and an older relative of most modern Western languages as well.

Sanskrit is regarded as a sacred language, and its sound is held to have a powerful transforming effect. The Gita is usually recited as a chant, and listening to a recitation of it in Sanskrit is considered uplifting even if one doesn't understand the words. (A recommended recording of such recitation is included in "Suggested Readings and Resources.")

An unrhymed poem, the Gita is mostly in what is called the *shloka* meter, consisting of four lines of eight syllables each—the translator Winthrop Sargeant compares it to the meter of Longfellow's *Hilawatha* ("By the shores of Gitchee Gumee" . . .). A number of stanzas are in the *tristubh* meter, consisting of four lines of eleven syllables each, used during

dramatic moments (for example, Arjuna's exclamation upon beholding Krishna's cosmic form, in chapter 11, verses 15-50).

Interpreting the Gita

Numerous pandits and gurus as well as Western scholars have written commentaries on the Gita. The various interpretations do not always agree, and there are many points of controversy. Does the Gita teach monism, monotheism, or dualism? Does it favor the dualistic Samkhya philosophy or the nondualistic Vedanta? The path of knowledge or the path of devotion? Action or inaction? Theism, pantheism, or pantheism? The teaching that the world is real or illusory? Arguments have been made for all of these competing perspectives. A traditional view holds that they are not disagreeing but rather looking at different facets of the same gem. As the Vedas state, truth is ever the same, though the wise speak of it in various ways.

Despite the controversies, most readers can agree that the heart of the Gita's message is "Love God." Perhaps the Gita is best read intuitively rather than analytically. The great modern sage Sri Aurobindo advises us not to be overly concerned with how the Gita was understood in its own place and time; rather we should extract from it the living truths that meet our own spiritual needs, for the Gita's spirit is large, profound, universal, and timeless. As stated in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, the text "changes with each reader, fluctuates in meaning with each successive generation of interpreters, which is to say, it lives. This vitality constitutes its sacrality."

Krishna as God in Human Form

An important feature of the Gita's teaching is Krishna's identity as the Avatar (from Sanskrit *avatāra*, "descent"). The Avatar, who is God directly "descended" into human form (as contrasted with a human being who "ascends" to a state of God-consciousness), appears on earth periodically—in different forms, under different names, in different parts of the

world—to restore truth in the world and to shower grace on the lovers of God. In the Vedic tradition, Krishna is worshiped as an Avatar of Vishnu, that aspect of the one indivisible God which preserves and protects the creation. Yet many people regard him as a universal savior comparable to (or even identical with) such world teachers as Christ and Buddha.

The Gita makes clear that Krishna is the Supreme Deity and not simply "a god." This does not mean, however, that only the advent of God as Krishna is worthy of worship, or that any one divine incarnation is superior to any other: all God-realized beings are one in consciousness, because God is always one and the same. As Aurobindo writes, the Avatar, "though he is manifest in the name and form of Krishna, lays no exclusiveness on this one form of his human birth, but on that which it represents, the Divine, the Purushottama [Supreme Spirit], of whom all Avatars are the human births."

Although the name Krishna is usually translated as "Black" or "Dark Blue," some translators give the meaning as "Puller," because Krishna draws the hearts of all beings to himself. Stories about Krishna in the collections of legends known as the Puranas celebrate his irresistibly loving and lovable nature—as a mischievous child and youth, playing his enchanting flute and attracting the devotion of the cowherding girls and boys (for Krishna himself was chief of the cowherds). Swami Nikhilananda writes: "No eyes ever had enough of the exquisite beauty of Krishna, the dark-blue form clad in a yellow robe, a garland of wild flowers hanging from His neck, and a peacock feather adorning His crest." This playful and adorable aspect of Krishna is less obvious in the Gita, where attention is drawn more to his role as wise teacher and compassionate friend.

Many writers treat Krishna as a figure of mythology and question whether such a historical personage ever existed; or else they say he was a human hero who was later divinized. A similar controversy is taking place about the historical Jesus versus the mythic Christ. In both cases—and especially in Krishna's, since his advent was so long ago—it is not possible

to establish the facts in terms of contemporary methodology. History and legend are now bound too closely to untangle. On the other hand, just as Christian tradition holds that the Gospel accounts were inspired by the Holy Spirit and are not merely the product of their human authors, so too, according to the Vedic tradition, the testimonials of the seers regarding Krishna's advent are based on mystical knowledge that is not merely a fanciful exaggeration of facts but rather a deeper insight into reality arising from advanced states of consciousness.

Aurobindo comments that to the spiritual aspirant, controversies over historicity are a waste of time: the Krishna who matters to us is the eternal incarnation of the Divine that we know by inner experience, not the historical teacher and leader. For his lovers, Lord Krishna is a living reality whose companionship is possible to experience here and now, as devotees of all times (including our own) will attest. The Divine Beloved is always with us and within us, because God *is* our own Self. The Avatar is like the sun, which never actually disappears, even though from our limited perspective it appears to vanish at sunset. This divine presence can be felt when one reads the Gita with a spirit of devotion.

For many people in the world, not only Hindus, reading or reciting a portion of the *Bhagavad Gita* is part of their daily spiritual practice. The hearts of many others have been touched by reading it only once with openness to the transforming power of the words of Lord Krishna. May you be so blessed.

About the Translation and Annotation □

Shri Purohit Swami's 1935 elegant prose version of the *Bhagavad Gita* is a good choice for first-time readers of the text. The translator uses few foreign terms and omits most of the epithets of Krishna and Arjuna sprinkled throughout the dialogue. This approach makes the translation easier to read, since one doesn't have to puzzle over unfamiliar words. Today's readers, however, often want to understand shades of meaning where there are no exact English equivalents. I have therefore provided some of the original Sanskrit wording (with simple, nontechnical spelling rather than the scholarly transliteration seen in other books) and definitions in the annotations. A list of special terms at the back of the book will enable the reader to find definitions for key concepts.

Many readers of spiritual works appreciate inclusive language that avoids the generic use of masculine nouns and pronouns. I have not seen any Gita version or commentary that overcomes this problem or even tries to. Since I wanted to maintain the integrity of Purohit Swami's translation as much as possible, I changed this kind of wording only in a very few instances. I don't believe that the Gita itself is "sexist." Like other great teachings, it is addressed to the understanding of a particular time and place, yet its meaning is universal. The essential message speaks to each of us today, although we may have to look more deeply than the specific historical and religious details of the text to receive it.

I took the liberty of substituting modern language for the thee's and thou's, and changing points of grammar and style such as spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. I altered some of the chapter titles and deleted the "colophons," or closing lines of chapters, omitted from many other editions as well. (As an example, the colophon for chapter 1 reads:

"Thus, in the Holy Book the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the Upanishads, in the Science of the Supreme Spirit, in the Art of Self-Knowledge, in the colloquy between the Divine Lord Shri Krishna and the Prince Arjuna, stands the first chapter, entitled: The Despondency of Arjuna."

Quoted passages in the annotations are cited simply by indicating the author's name. To find the exact source of a quotation, please see the "Notes" in the back of the book, keyed to chapter and annotation number. "Suggested Readings and Resources" includes some information about the main commentators quoted.

With the annotations, I sought to make the text more accessible, to point out interesting ideas, to highlight notable interpretations, and to magnify the inspirational value of the Gita. In choosing quotations from well-known commentators, I leaned toward the devotional rather than the scholarly, the practical rather than the theoretical, the symbolic rather than the literal, and the traditional but not the conventionally religious. My intention was not to insist on particular interpretations but to spark interest for further study and contemplation.

I have compiled the annotations as a student of the Gita and a lover of God rather than as a commentator in the traditional sense or as a contributor to modern scholarship. The book demonstrates, I hope, how someone like myself, unschooled in Sanskrit and the Vedic literature, is able to approach this ancient wisdom as a matter of practical spirituality. The primary appeal of the Gita is, after all, to the ordinary seeker rather than the monk or scholar; for the Avatar comes to redeem all of humanity, and his perennial message—"Become one with God through love"—is likewise for everyone.

Bhagavad Gita

1 □ The Dependency of Arjuna

The King Dhritarashtra asked:

1 O Sanjaya! What happened on the sacred battlefield of Kurukshetra,¹ when my people gathered against the Pandavas? Sanjaya replied:

2 The Prince Duryodhana, when he saw the army of the Pandavas paraded, approached his preceptor² Guru Drona and spoke as follows:

3 "Revered Father! Behold this mighty host of the Pandavas, paraded by the son of King Drupada, your wise disciple.

4 "In it are heroes and great bowmen; the equals in battle of Arjuna and Bhima, Yuyudhana, Virata, and Drupada, great soldiers all;

5 "Dhrishtaketu, Chekitana, the valiant King of Benares, Purujit, Kuntibhoja, Shaivya—a master over many;

6 "Yudhamanyu, Urtamauja, Saubhadra, and the sons of Draupadi, famous men.

7 "Further, take note of all those captains who have ranged themselves on our side, O best of spiritual guides!³ the leaders of my army. I will name them for you.

8 "You come first, then Bhisma, Karna,⁴ Kripa, great soldiers, Ashvathama, Vikarna, and the son of Somadatta;

9 "And many others, all ready to die for my sake, all armed, all skilled in war.

1 The Gita begins with the words *Dharmakshetre Kurukshetre*, "on the sacred battlefield of Kurukshetra." *Kshetra* means "field." *Dharma* (literally, "that which sustains or upholds") has several meanings: "the inner code of life; moral, religious; and spiritual law; living faith in God's existence and in one's own existence; soulful duty, especially enjoined by the scriptures; devoted observances of any caste or sect, willingness to abide by the dictates of one's soul" (Chinmoy). *Dharma* might be variously translated as "law," "order," "duty," "righteousness," or "virtue."

Kurukshetra, the battlefield of Kuru (ancestor of the Kauravas), is an actual site in India, northwest of Delhi, sacred because holy men practiced spiritual disciplines there from ancient times. But *kshetra* can also be interpreted as the human body, "the locus of the self" (Barbara Stoler Miller). More broadly, Miller says that the Gita is concerned with "the whole field of human experience, the realm of material nature in which the struggle for self-knowledge occurs."

2 Preceptor (*acharya*): Drona is the military teacher of the sons of both Pandu and Dhritarashtra.

3 Spiritual guides: *dvija*, literally "the twice-born," refers here to brahmins, members of the highest caste. Males of any of the three higher castes are considered to undergo a second birth when initiated into spiritual life with the investiture of the sacred thread. On the meaning of caste, see ch. 18, n. 5.

4 Karna is a son that Arjuna's mother, Kunti, bore before she married Pandu. Although he is thus a brother of the Pandava princes, it happened that he ended up on the Kauravas' side in the war.

5 This verse is puzzling because "our army" is the Kauravas, which is the larger force, so why would it seem weaker? Perhaps the moral superiority of the Pandavas makes them seem more powerful. Some translators solve the problem by transposing the names so that Bhishma's army becomes the one that is considered stronger or even "unlimited."

6 The "lion's roar" is a common expression in Sanskrit for a triumphant or confident declaration. The blowing of the conch is a challenge to fight; thus the Kauravas are shown to be the aggressors. Symbolically, the conch means a call to the spiritual life. Just as Krishna's flute calls the heart to love of the Lord, so does his conch summon the soul to courage in the struggle of life.

Yogananda says that this passage refers to the inner experience of meditation: the Kauravas' conches symbolize vibratory noises caused by restless breathing and bodily sensations that disturb the deep stillness of meditation. By contrast, the sounds of the Pandavas' conches (1.14-18) are uplifting vibrations emanating from the subtle energy centers (chakras) in the spine and brain, indicating the meditator's success in withdrawing consciousness from the external world.

7 In the *Katha Upanishad*, the chariot is a symbol of the body: "Self rides in the chariot of the body, intellect the firm-footed charioteer, discursive mind the reins. Senses are the horses, objects of desire the roads. When Self is joined to body, mind, sense, none but He enjoys" (Purohit & Yeats).

8 Dharmaraja is another name for Yudhishthira, one of the five Pandavas. The other four are Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva.

9 The monkey king Hanuman, a hero of the epic *Ramayana*, is a model of devoted service to God in His incarnation as Lord Rama.

10 "Yet our army seems the weaker, though commanded by Bhishma; their army seems the stronger, though commanded by Bhima."⁵

11 "Therefore in the rank and file, let all stand firm in their posts, according to battalions; and all you generals about Bhishma."

12 Then to enliven his spirits, the brave Grandfather Bhishma, eldest of the Kuru clan, blew his conch till it sounded like a lion's roar.⁶

13 And immediately all the conches and drums, the trumpets and horns, blared forth in tumultuous uproar.

14 Then seated in their spacious war chariot,⁷ yoked with white horses, Lord Shri Krishna and Arjuna sounded their divine shells.

15 Lord Shri Krishna blew His Panchajanya and Arjuna his Devadatta, brave Bhima his renowned shell, Paundra.

16 The King Dharmaraja,⁸ the son of Kunti, blew the Anantavijaya, Nakula and Sahadeva, the Sughoshha and Manipushpaka respectively.

17 And the Maharaja of Benares, the great archer, Shikhandi, the great soldier, Dhristadyumna, Virata, and Satyaki the invincible;

18 And O King! Drupada, the sons of Draupadi, and Saubhadra the great soldier, blew their conches.

19 The tumult rent the hearts of the sons of Dhritarashtra, and violently shook heaven and earth with its echo.

20 Then beholding the sons of Dhritarashtra, drawn up on the battlefield, ready to begin the fight, Arjuna, whose flag bore the Hanuman,⁹

21 Raising his bow, spoke thus to the Lord Shri Krishna: "O Infalible! Lord of the earth! Please draw up my chariot between the two armies,

22 "So that I may observe those who must fight on my side, those who must fight against me;

23 "And gaze over this array of soldiers, eager to please the sinful son of Dhritarashtra."

☉ "Just as the first day of battle started, Arjuna...asked Krishna, his charioteer, to draw up the chariot between the two armies, and the *Bhagavad Gita*—all 2,800 lines of it—was spoken between Krishna and Arjuna. The great Yale Sanskritist Franklin Edgerton has called this a dramatic absurdity. With all due respect, I do not agree. When God speaks, it is not illogical for time to stand still while armies stand frozen in their places."
—Winthrop Sargeant

10 These first words of Lord Krishna may be regarded as His first instructions to Arjuna. According to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, they have a significance that has been overlooked by commentators who merely portray Arjuna as "a confused mental wreck." At first Arjuna is confident and eager for battle; but as soon as Krishna directs him to behold the assembled warriors, he is overcome by sadness (1.28) and is unable to fight. In the original Sanskrit, Krishna addresses Arjuna as Partha, meaning "son of Pritha"—an epithet for Arjuna's mother (omitted from the present translation). The mention of his mother, says Maharishi, stirs compassion in Arjuna's heart and conflict in his mind. Krishna has thus deliberately placed him in a state of suspension between love and duty, so that he is unable to act. Why did Krishna do this? Because in this state Arjuna is ready to request (2.7) and willingly receive the teaching that Krishna wishes to bestow on him; for wisdom cannot be imparted to a person unless he or she asks for it.

11 Gandiva is the name of Arjuna's magical bow, with its two inexhaustible quivers and the power of a thousand bows. It was given to him by Agni (god of fire), who got it from Varuna (god of waters), who got it from Soma (god of the ritual soma plant, worshiped as a source of creative power). A bow, according to Sri Aurobindo, is a "symbol of the force [Shakti, power, energy] sent out to reach its mark."

12 Three worlds: in other words, all the universe. The three worlds can be heaven, earth, and hell; the gross (physical), subtle (mental), and causal (divine) worlds; or the human, semidivine, and divine realms (earth, atmospheric regions, and heavens).

Sanjaya said:

24 Having listened to the request of Arjuna, Lord Shri Krishna drew up His bright chariot exactly in the midst between the two armies,
25 Whither Bhishma and Drona had led all the rulers of the earth, and spoke thus: "O Arjuna! Behold these members of the family of Kuru assembled."¹⁰

26 There Arjuna noticed fathers, grandfathers, uncles, cousins, sons, grandsons, teachers, friends,

27 Fathers-in-law and benefactors, arrayed on both sides. Arjuna then gazed at all those kinsmen before him.

28 And his heart melted with pity and sadly he spoke: "O my Lord! When I see all these, my own people, thirsting for battle,

29 "My limbs fail me and my throat is parched, my body trembles and my hair stands on end.

30 "The bow Gandiva¹¹ slips from my hand, and my skin burns. I cannot keep quiet, for my mind is in a tumult.

31 "The omens are adverse, what good can come from the slaughter of my people on this battlefield?

32 "Ah, my Lord! I crave not for victory, nor for kingdom, nor for any pleasure. What were a kingdom or happiness or life to me,

33 "When those for whose sake I desire these things stand here about to sacrifice their property and their lives:

34 "Teachers, fathers, and grandfathers, sons and grandsons, uncles, fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law, and other relatives.

35 "I would not kill them, even for the three worlds,¹² why then for this poor earth? It matters not if I myself am killed.

36 "My Lord! What happiness can come from the death of these sons of Dhritarashtra? We shall sin if we kill these desperate men.

13 The reference is to Hindu rites for the dead ancestors, which may not be performed by children of mixed-caste marriages.

14 "Arjuna has turned a complete pacifist and adopted the policy of non-resistance to evil. But this policy is wrong, inasmuch as if one sees evil one must resist it. The real attitude of non-violence follows from the perception of God in all beings. Only the man whose mind has gone beyond good and evil does not resist evil, for he does not see evil. Further, Arjuna is a kshatriya [member of the warrior caste]; hence it is his duty to fight in a righteous cause" (Nikhilananda).

15 "All life is a battlefield...; whether we like it or not, we are born to fight. We have no choice in this, but we do have the choice of our opponent and our weapon. If we fight other people, often our dear ones, we cannot but lose, but if we choose to fight all that is selfish and violent in us, we cannot but win. There is no such thing as defeat on the spiritual path once we join Sri Krishna, but if we try to fight against him, we shall never know victory."
—Eknath Easwaran

37 "We are worthy of a nobler feat than to slaughter our relatives—the sons of Dhritarashtra, for, my Lord! how can we be happy if we kill our kinsmen?"

38 "Although these men, blinded by greed, see no guilt in destroying their kin or fighting against their friends,

39 "Should not we, whose eyes are open, who consider it to be wrong to annihilate our house, turn away from so great a crime?"

40 "The destruction of our kindred means the destruction of the traditions of our ancient lineage, and when these are lost, irreligion will overrun our homes.

41 "When irreligion spreads, the women of the house begin to stray; when they lose their purity, adulteration of the stock follows.

42 "Promiscuity ruins both the family and those who defile it; while the souls of our ancestors droop, through lack of the funeral cakes and ablutions. **13**

43 "By the destruction of our lineage and the pollution of blood, ancient class traditions and family purity alike perish.

44 "The wise say, my Lord! that they are forever lost, whose ancient traditions are lost.

45 "Alas, it is strange that we should be willing to kill our own countrymen and commit a great sin, in order to enjoy the pleasures of a kingdom.

46 "If, on the contrary, the sons of Dhritarashtra, with weapons in their hands, should slay me, unarmed and unresisting, surely that would be better for my welfare!"

Sanjaya said:

47 Having spoken thus, in the midst of the armies, Arjuna sank on the seat of the chariot, casting away his bow and arrow, heartbroken with grief. **14**

2 □ The Philosophy of Discrimination: Samkhya Yoga

1 "Aryan" derives from the Sanskrit *arya* ("noble" or "honorable"), a word applied in ancient times to great spiritual personalities. Western scholars adopted the term to designate a category of Indo-Iranian languages as well as an ethnic or racial group, also known as "Indo-Europeans." These Aryans were a fair-skinned nomadic people believed to have migrated in prehistoric times from the plains north of the Caucasus, some tribes settling in northern Europe, others in Iran and northern India. The "Aryan invasion" of India has been questioned by authors such as Georg Feuerstein and David Frawley, who argue that the Sanskrit-speaking Vedic Aryans were not foreign invaders but indigenous inhabitants of India. The Nazis promoted the fiction, concocted in Europe in the nineteenth century, of a morally superior "Aryan race," of which Nordic or Germanic peoples were supposedly the purest examples.

2 Effeminacy: The Sanskrit original means "weakness of heart." "In this world which baffles our reason, violence there will always be. The Gita shows the way which will lead us out of it, but it also says that we cannot escape it by running away from it like cowards" (Gandhi).

3 As it happened, so many arrows were shot into Bhishma during the battle that he was able to lie parallel to the ground, supported by the arrow shafts. This event furnished the model for the well-known "bed of nails" used by some Indian ascetics. Bhishma lay on his bed of arrows and waited to die until the sun turned north, thus choosing an auspicious moment for his death in the manner described in 8.24.

1 Sanjaya then told how the Lord Shri Krishna, seeing Arjuna overwhelmed with compassion, his eyes dimmed with flowing tears and full of despondency, consoled him.

The Lord said:

2 My beloved friend! Why yield, just on the eve of battle, to this weakness which does no credit to those who call themselves Aryans,¹ and only brings them infamy and bars against them the gates of heaven?

3 O Arjuna! Why give way to unmanliness? O you who are the terror of your enemies! Shake off such shameful effeminacy,² make ready to act! Arjuna argued:

4 My Lord! How can I, when the battle rages, send an arrow through Bhishma³ and Drona, who should receive my reverence?

5 Rather would I content myself with a beggar's crust than kill these teachers of mine, these precious noble souls! To slay these masters who are my benefactors would be to stain the sweetness of life's pleasure with their blood.

6 Nor can I say whether it were better that they conquer me or for me to conquer them, since I would no longer care to live if I killed these sons of Dhritarashtra, now preparing for fight.

7 My heart is oppressed with pity, and my mind confused as to what my duty is. Therefore, my Lord! tell me what is best for my spiritual welfare, for I am Your disciple. Please direct me, I pray.

4 Lord of All Hearts: This epithet evokes the adorable aspect of Krishna, who, in his youth as a cowherd in the village of Brindaban, won the hearts of the cowherding girls (*gopis*) and boys (*gopas*). Krishna is often called Govinda, meaning chief of the cowherds, which reflects his mastery of the senses (symbolized by cows).

5 Krishna's smile has been interpreted in several different ways. Some commentators think that Krishna is mocking Arjuna with his smile, but if we realize that Krishna, as a spiritual teacher, has only Arjuna's welfare at heart, we may envision the smile as an expression of grace, affection, or patient encouragement. Maharishi points out that although Arjuna is in despair, the Lord smiles in his usual playful mood to show Arjuna that his difficulties are not so serious as he thinks. Yogananda interprets the entire Gita as symbolic of internal experiences of the practitioner of yoga who is battling inner obstacles to liberation. He thus offers the image of Arjuna "basking in the illumining smile of Spirit" as he begins to receive Krishna's sublime discourse.

6 "Life is a series of experiences which need innumerable forms. Death is an interval in that one long life" (Meher Baba).

7 "Krishna is not speaking of the Stoic calmness, in which agitation of feeling is not outwardly expressed. The calmness of which He speaks is based on the knowledge of the Soul's immortality" (Nikhilananda).

8 "That which is not" is the ever-changing Nature (Prakriti); "that which is" is the eternal Spirit (Purusha in the Sankhya philosophy) or Self (Atman in Vedanta). "The ocean can exist without the waves, but the waves cannot manifest without the ocean. The ocean is the real substance, the waves are only temporary changes on the ocean, and therefore 'unreal' (in themselves they have no independent existence). The ocean, in essence, does not change whether it is calm or restless with waves; but the waves change their forms—they come and they go. Their essence is change, and therefore unreality" (Yogananda).

8 For should I attain the monarchy of the visible world, or over the invisible world, it would not drive away the anguish which is now paralyzing my senses.

Sanjaya continued:

9 Arjuna, the conqueror of all enemies, then told the Lord of All Hearts⁴ that he would not fight, and became silent, O King!

10 Thereupon the Lord, with a gracious smile,⁵ addressed him who was so much depressed in the midst between the two armies.

Lord Shri Krishna said:

11 Why grieve for those for whom no grief is due, and yet profess wisdom? The wise grieve neither for the dead nor for the living.

12 There was never a time when I was not, nor you, nor these princes were not; there will never be a time when we shall cease to be.

13 As the soul experiences in this body, infancy, youth, and old age, so finally it passes into another.⁶ The wise have no delusion about this.

14 Those external relations which bring cold and heat, pain and happiness, they come and go; they are not permanent. Endure them bravely, O Prince!

15 The hero whose soul is unmoved by circumstance, who accepts pleasure and pain with equanimity,⁷ only he is fit for immortality.

16 That which is not, shall never be; that which is, shall never cease to be.⁸ To the wise, these truths are self-evident.

17 The Spirit, which pervades all that we see, is imperishable. Nothing can destroy the Spirit.

18 The material bodies which this Eternal, Indestructible, Immeasurable Spirit inhabits are all finite. Therefore fight, O Valiant Man!

19 He who thinks that the Spirit kills, and he who thinks of it as killed,

9 Verses 2.19–20 are quoted from the *Katha Upanishad* (1.2.19 and 1.2.18, respectively).

10 “He who is afraid kills. He for whom there is no death will not kill” (Gandhi).

are both ignorant. The Spirit kills not, nor is it killed.

20 It was not born, It will never die; nor once having been, can It ever cease to be: Unborn, Eternal, Ever-enduring, yet Most Ancient, the Spirit dies not when the body is dead.⁹

21 He who knows the Spirit as Indestructible, Immortal, Unborn, Always-the-Same, how should he kill or cause to be killed?¹⁰

22 As a man discards his threadbare robes and puts on new, so the Spirit throws off Its worn-out bodies and takes fresh ones.

23 Weapons cleave It not, fire burns It not, water drenches It not, and wind dries It not.

24 It is impenetrable; It can be neither drowned nor scorched nor dried. It is Eternal, All-pervading, Unchanging, Immovable, and Most Ancient.

25 It is named the Unmanifest, the Unthinkable, the Immutably. Wherefore, knowing the Spirit as such, you have no cause to grieve.

26 Even if you think of it as constantly being born, constantly dying; even then, O Mighty Man! you still have no cause to grieve.

27 For death is as sure for that which is born as birth is for that which is dead. Therefore grieve not for what is inevitable.

28 The end and beginning of beings are unknown. We see only the intervening formations. Then what cause is there for grief?

29 One hears of the Spirit with surprise, another thinks It marvelous, the third listens without comprehending. Thus, though many are told about It, scarcely is there one who knows It.

30 Be not anxious about these armies. The Spirit in man is imperishable.

31 You must look at your duty. Nothing can be more welcome to a soldier than a righteous war.¹¹ Therefore to waver in your resolve is unworthy, O Arjuna!

11 Soldier: *kshatriya*, the caste of warriors and rulers. A righteous war is welcome because the duty (*svadharma*) of the soldier is to uphold justice and protect the people. For more on duty, see ch. 3, n. 10; on caste, see ch. 18, n. 5.

12 Kunti is the mother of three of the five Pandava princes—Arjuna, Yudhishtira, and Bhima. (She is also Krishna's aunt.) Krishna often addresses Arjuna as Kaunteya, "son of Kunti." Since her sons are all great heroes, Krishna seems to be reminding Arjuna of his heroic status.

13 "The Gita is not a justification of war, nor does it propound a war-making mystique.... The Gita is saying that even in what appears 'unspiritual,' one can act with pure intentions and thus be guided by Krishna consciousness."
—Thomas Merton

14 The "philosophy of Knowledge" is Sankhya, one of six traditional systems of Indian philosophy; elsewhere it is referred to as *Jnana yoga*. Among its teachings is the distinction between soul and body explained by Krishna above. It also stresses renunciation of action.

15 The "philosophy of Action" is Yoga, specifically *karma yoga*, which stresses renunciation of the fruits of action but not of action itself.

16 The various schools of philosophy need not be seen as competing with one another: "Sankhya and Yoga are never at daggers drawn. One is detached meditative knowledge, and the other is dedicated and selfless action. They have the self-same Goal. They just follow two different paths to arrive at the Goal."
—Sri Chinmoy

17 Figurative: literally "flowery." The ignorant are attached to words and think there is nothing in the Vedas but rituals for attaining heaven, wealth, and the like; they ignore the teachings that lead to liberation.

32 Blessed are the soldiers who find their opportunity. This opportunity has opened for you the gates of heaven.

33 Refuse to fight in this righteous cause, and you will be a traitor, lost to fame, incurring only sin.

34 Men will talk forever of your disgrace, and to the noble, dishonor is worse than death.

35 Great generals will think that you have fled from the battlefield through cowardice; though once honored, you will seem despicable.

36 Your enemies will spread scandal and mock at your courage. Can anything be more humiliating?

37 If killed, you shall attain heaven; if victorious, enjoy the kingdom of earth. Therefore arise, O son of Kunti!¹² and fight.

38 Look upon pleasure and pain, victory and defeat, with an equal eye. Make ready for the combat, and you shall commit no sin.

39 I have told you the philosophy of Knowledge.¹³ Now listen! and I will explain the philosophy of Action,¹⁴ by means of which, O Arjuna, you shall break through the bondage of all action.

40 On this Path, endeavor is never wasted, nor can it ever be repressed. Even a very little of its practice protects one from great danger.

41 By its means, the straying intellect becomes steadied in the contemplation of one object only; whereas the minds of the irresolute stray into bypaths innumerable.

42 Only the ignorant speak in figurative¹⁵ language. It is they who extol the letter of the scriptures, saying, "There is nothing deeper than this."

43 Consulting only their desires, they construct their own heaven, devising arduous and complex rites to secure their own pleasure and their own power, and the only result is rebirth.

16 Vedic Scriptures: *Rig Veda* (verses and songs in praise of the gods), *Sama Veda* (chants), *Yajur Veda* (a priestly manual for performing rituals of sacrifice), and *Atharva Veda* (magic formulas).

17 In Sanskrit, the first of the three Qualities (*gunas*) is *sattva*, called Purity in this version (other translators render it as goodness, consciousness, or truth). *Rajas* is Passion (desire, attachment, activity, the dynamic principle), and *tamas* is Ignorance (inertia, darkness).

The doctrine of the three Qualities is found in the Vedas, which prescribe rituals for those who, under the influence of the Qualities, seek to attain material rewards and blessings of the gods. Such rituals are the very opposite of what Krishna is teaching about action without concern for reward. So, in telling Arjuna to rise above the Qualities, Krishna seems also to say that the spiritual seeker ultimately has to go beyond the conventions of rites, rituals, and scriptures.

18 Other translators interpret this verse to mean that an enlightened person has no need for scriptures, just as there is no need for a well when the whole countryside is flooded. "The state of realization is like a reservoir full of water, from which people quite naturally draw to satisfy all their needs instead of getting their water from many small ponds. Therefore the Lord asks Arjuna to 'be without the three gunas' and not waste his life in planning and achieving small gains in the ever-changing field of the three gunas" (Maharishi).

19 Pure Intelligence: *buddhi yoga*, "taking refuge in the 'wisdom-faculty'" (Feuerstein). On *buddhi*, see below, n. 27.

20 Contemplation of the Infinite: *samadhī*, a state of consciousness equated with ecstatic concentration on the object of meditation, so that all mental activity stops.

21 "Spirituality" is Purohit Swami's translation of the word *yoga*, which signifies the state of union with God as well as any of several paths or disciplines that lead to union. The physical discipline known as *hatha yoga* is the best-known *yoga* in the West, but many regard it as only a preliminary path leading to more advanced practices.

44 While their minds are absorbed with ideas of power and personal enjoyment, they cannot concentrate their discrimination on one point.

45 The Vedic Scriptures¹⁶ tell of the three constituents of life—the Qualities.¹⁷ Rise above all of them, O Arjuna! above all the pairs of opposing sensations; be steady in truth, free from worldly anxieties, and centered in the Self.

46 As a man can drink water from any side of a full tank, so the skilled theologian can wrest from any scripture that which will serve his purpose.¹⁸

47 But you have only the right to work, but none to the fruit thereof. Let not then the fruit of your action be your motive; nor yet be enamored of inaction.

48 Perform all your actions with mind concentrated on the Divine, renouncing attachment and looking upon success and failure with an equal eye. Spirituality implies equanimity.

49 Physical action is far inferior to an intellect concentrated on the Divine. Have recourse then to the Pure Intelligence.¹⁹ It is only the petty-minded who work for reward.

50 When a man attains to Pure Reason, he renounces in this world the results of good and evil alike. Cling to Right Action. Spirituality is the real art of living.

51 The sages guided by Pure Intellect renounce the fruit of action; and, freed from the chains of rebirth, they reach the highest bliss.

52 When your reason has crossed the entanglements of illusion, then shall you become indifferent both to the philosophies you have heard and to those you may yet hear.

53 When the intellect, bewildered by the multiplicity of holy scripts, stands unperturbed in blissful contemplation of the Infinite,²⁰ then have you attained Spirituality.²¹

22 "This question of Arjuna's introduces the glorious eighteen stanzas [2:55–72] which, as Gandhi points out, hold the key to the interpretation of the entire *Bhagavad Gita*. Gandhi, a devoted student of the Gita, was especially drawn to these last eighteen verses of the second chapter.... In every verse of this passage we have clear proof that the battle referred to is within, between the forces of selfishness and the forces of selflessness, between the ferocious pull of the senses and the serene tranquility of spiritual wisdom. I strongly recommend these verses to be memorized for use in meditation because they gradually can bring about the transformation of our consciousness" (Easwaran).

23 Accepts good and evil alike: This means that one does not get over-excited when good things happen or upset when bad things happen. It does not imply that one invites or sanctions evil. As Ramakrishna said, God is in everything—but you do not embrace a tiger.

24 The tortoise image is a favorite metaphor for the practice of *pratyahara*, withdrawal of the senses or the "ability to free sense activity from the domination of external objects" (Eliade). "The senses can be involved with outer experiences and yet not be totally engrossed in them to the extent that they transfer to the mind impressions deep enough to become the seed of future desires" (Maharishi).

25 Mind: *manas*, here meaning the lower mind, which receives impressions from the senses and relays them to the higher mind (*buddhi*; see n. 27). The function of *manas* includes both thought and emotion.

26 Desire (*kama*) is said to breed anger because anger arises when desire is thwarted.

27 Reason: *buddhi*, rendered elsewhere as "intelligence" or "intellect," the seat of wisdom (*inana*, *vidya*, *prajna*). The word comes from the root *bud*, "to awaken." "Buddhi is the aspect of consciousness that is filled with light and reveals the truth. When one's Buddhi becomes fully developed, one becomes a Buddha, or enlightened one. The main action of intelligence is to discern the true and real from the false and unreal" (Frawley).

Arjuna asked:

54 My Lord! How can we recognize the saint who has attained Pure Intellect, who has reached this state of Bliss, and whose mind is steady? How does he talk, how does he live, and how does he act?²²

Lord Shri Krishna replied:

55 When a man has given up the desires of his heart and is satisfied with the Self alone, be sure that he has reached the highest state.

56 The sage, whose mind is unruffled in suffering, whose desire is not roused by enjoyment, who is without attachment, anger, or fear—take him to be one who stands at that lofty level.

57 He who, wherever he goes, is attached to no person and to no place by ties of flesh, who accepts good and evil alike,²³ neither welcoming the one nor shrinking from the other—take him to be one who is merged in the Infinite.

58 He who can withdraw his senses from the attraction of their objects, as the tortoise draws his limbs within his shell²⁴—take it that such a one has attained Perfection.

59 The objects of sense turn from him who is abstemious. Even the relish for them is lost in him who has seen the Truth.

60 O Arjuna! The mind²⁵ of him who is trying to conquer it is forcibly carried away in spite of his efforts, by his tumultuous senses.

61 Restraining them all, let him meditate steadfastly on Me; for who thus conquers his senses achieves perfection.

62 When a man dwells on the objects of sense, he creates an attraction for them; attraction develops into desire, and desire breeds anger.²⁶

63 Anger induces delusion, delusion, loss of memory, through loss of memory, reason²⁷ is shattered, and loss of reason leads to destruction.

28 Eternal peace: *prasada*, serenity or clarity. *Prasada* also means "grace." SriL Prabhupada translates it in this verse as "the complete mercy of the Lord." By the grace or mercy of God, the devotee becomes liberated from delusion.

29 Reason: *prajna*. See above, n. 27.

30 Saint: *muni*, "silent one." A *muni* is an advanced aspirant who has reached a high level of consciousness through practicing austerities such as silence. The English word *saint* has specific associations in Christianity. In this translation, a more general sense of spiritual holiness seems to be intended.

31 Self, Supreme Spirit: Brahman, the ultimate Reality, the formless absolute state of God, which is inseparable from the personal God and also identical with the soul or inmost self (Atman) of every being. Brahman is all, the One without a second. Because it cannot be described, it is often referred to by negation: *neti, neti*, "not this, not that."

32 "Become one with the Eternal": literally, "reach the *nirvana* of Brahman." *Nirvana* means "blown out," like a candle, but it is not utter extinction or a state of nonbeing; Sri Easwaran explains it as the extinction of the limited, selfish personality. The illusion of separate individuality ceases to exist when the self merges with Brahman, just as the limited nature of a drop of seawater disappears when it reunites with the ocean.

33 "One of the beauties of the *Bhagavad Gita* is that it does not say 'You should do this' or 'You shouldn't do that.' Sri Krishna simply says that if you want joy, security, wisdom, then this is the path. If you want sorrow, insecurity, and despair, then that is the path. He gives both maps in graphic detail, and tells you that it is for you to decide where you want to go."
—Eknath Easwaran

64 But the self-controlled soul, who moves among sense objects free from either attachment or repulsion, he wins eternal peace.²⁸

65 Having attained peace, he becomes free from misery; for when the mind gains peace, right discrimination follows.

66 Right discrimination is not for him who cannot concentrate. Without concentration, there cannot be meditation; he who cannot meditate must not expect peace; and without peace, how can anyone expect happiness?

67 As a ship at sea is tossed by the tempest, so the reason²⁹ is carried away by the mind when preyed upon by the straying senses.

68 Therefore, O Mighty-in-Arms! he who keeps his senses detached from their objects—take it that his reason is purified.

69 The saint³⁰ is awake when the world sleeps, and he ignores that for which the world lives.

70 He attains peace into whom desires flow as rivers into the ocean, which though brimming with water remains ever the same; not he whom desire carries away.

71 He attains peace who, giving up desire, moves through the world without aspiration, possessing nothing which he can call his own, and free from pride.

72 O Arjuna! This is the state of the Self, the Supreme Spirit;³¹ to which if a man once attain, it shall never be taken from him. Even at the time of leaving the body, he will remain firmly enthroned there, and will become one with the Eternal.³²