



the
**BHAGAVAD
GITA**
FOR MILLENNIALS

BIBEK DEBROY

the
BHAGAVAD
GITA
FOR MILLENNIALS

Bibek Debroy is a renowned economist, scholar and translator. He has worked in universities, research institutes and for the government. He is a widely published author of books, papers and articles on economics. As a translator, he has translated various ancient Indian texts into English and is best known for his magnificent ten-volume rendition of the Mahabharata as well as the three-volume Valmiki Ramayana.

the
BHAGAVAD
GITA
FOR MILLENNIALS

BIBEK DEBROY



Published by
Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd 2020
7/16, Ansari Road, Daryaganj
New Delhi 110002

Copyright © Bibek Debroy 2020

Cover painting: Krishna Vishvarupa. Thomas A. Woods Catherine Glynn Benkaim Prior to 1973
Thomas A. Woods [1]1987 Sale, London, Christie's, Islamic, Indian, and South-East Asian
Manuscripts, Miniatures and Works of Art, November 24, 1987, lot. Alamy

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

The views and opinions expressed in this book are the author's own and the facts are as reported by him which have been verified to the extent possible, and the publishers are not in any way liable for the same.

ISBN: 978-93-90260-38-6

First impression 2020

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated, without the publisher's prior consent, in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published.

For Shubhi and Vinayak

CONTENTS

Introduction

1. The Mahabharata
2. Sanskrit and Poetry
3. Krishna as a Historical Person
4. The Bhagavad Gita Synthesis
5. The *Smriti* Background
6. Who Am I?
7. What Am I Not?
8. The *Jivatman* and the *Paramatman*
9. Birth, Death, *Samsara* and Karma
10. *Ahamkara* and the Path of Bhakti

Acknowledgements

INTRODUCTION

Hinduism has many major texts, some of the *shruti* variety and some of the *smriti* variety. *Shruti* means that which has been heard or revealed. Therefore, *shruti* texts do not have a human agent as a composer. Examples of *shruti* texts are Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads. Not only do *shruti* texts have no human as a composer, they don't change from age to age. Vaguely, everyone is aware of the four *yugas*—*satya* or *krita yuga*, *treta yuga*, *dvapara yuga* and *kali yuga*. The Upanishads will be the same, regardless of which *yuga* we are in. A *smriti* text is something that is remembered, a reference to retention through memory, as knowledge was disseminated through oral transmission. The dharmashastra texts (like Manu Samhita), the *nitishastra* texts (like Panchatantra), *itihasa* (Ramayana, Mahabharata) and the Puranas are *smriti* texts. Each of these was composed by a human and each of these is specific to a certain age. In other words, if the Manu Samhita is appropriate for *satya yuga*, a different *samhita* may be appropriate for *kali yuga*.

Hinduism doesn't have one single text or holy book. There are multiple texts. However, forced to choose a single text that encapsulates Hinduism, most people will mention the Bhagavad Gita. It is important. It may be important, but it is a *smriti* text. It doesn't belong to the *shruti* category. Having said this, there are three texts (referred to as *trayi* or three) that capture the essence of Hinduism, or the Vedanta variety of Hinduism—the Upanishads, Brahmasutra (composed by Badarayana) and the Bhagavad Gita. Therefore, despite being a *smriti* text, the Bhagavad Gita has an elevated status.

We shouldn't write it as Bhagavad Gita. However, this has become so common that I am also committing the routine grammatical mistake. It should be written as Bhagavat Gita or Bhagavadgita. Sanskrit is a free-flowing language. It doesn't like obstructions or stops. Therefore, a word

flows into the next word and joins it. For example, everyone has heard of the word स्वागतम्— ‘Welcome’. That’s actually two words सु आगतम्— ‘Excellent arrival’. If one tries to say सु आगतम् without stopping between the two words, one will end up saying स्वागतम्. सु + आगतम् = स्वागतम्. In Sanskrit grammar, the rules of *sandhi* (union) have evolved to facilitate the joining of words. The last letter of a word is combined with the first letter of the following word. Following such a rule of *sandhi*, भगवत् + गीता = भगवद्गीता. Therefore, we should write it as Bhagavat Gita or Bhagavadgita, not Bhagavad Gita. But, as I said, the error has become common. Similarly, in connection with the Bhagavad Gita, one will sometimes find an adjective—श्रीमत् + भगवद्गीता = श्रीमद्भगवद्गीता.

The adjective, *shrimat* (श्रीमत्), means splendid or glorious. In other words, the expression means the glorious Bhagavad Gita. Gita is something that is sung. It is a poem set to metre. It is a song. The word *bhagavat* (भगवत्) means glorious, divine, blessed, lordly or prosperous. It is quite common for words in Sanskrit to have multiple meanings, with multiple nuances. Thus, Bhagavad Gita can be translated as the glorious song, the divine song, the sacred song, the blessed song or the lord’s song. All these are correct. In 1885, Edwin Arnold (1832–1904) translated the Bhagavad Gita as ‘The Song Celestial’.

One shouldn’t form the impression that the Bhagavad Gita is the only Gita. Indeed, the qualification Bhagavad does suggest there are other Gitas. There are other such ‘songs’. It may be the case that the Bhagavad Gita was the first such Gita. It is certainly the case that it is the most important of these Gitas. Nevertheless, one should be aware that there are other such Gitas. There is a website that has Sanskrit documents. It is a very useful website to study and understand the Bhagavad Gita too. It has a list of such other Gitas and their texts.¹ The list has (1) Agastya Gita (Varaha Purana); (2) Ajagara Gita; (3) Anu Gita (Mahabharata); (4) Avadhuta Gita (Padma Purana); (5) Ashtavakra Gita; (6) Utathya Gita (Mahabharata); (7) Uttara Gita (Brahmanda Purana); (8) Uddhava Gita (Bhagavata Purana); (9) Ribhu Gita (Shiva Rahasya Purana); (10) Rishabha Gita (Mahabharata); (11) Aila Gita (Bhagavata Purana); (12) Kapila Gita (Bhagavata Purana);² (13) Karuna Gita (Bhagavata Purana); (14) Kama Gita (Mahabharata); (15) Kashyapa Gita; (16) Ganesha Gita (Ganesha Purana); (17) Garbha Gita; (18) Gayatri Gita; (19) Guru Gita (Skanda Purana); (20) Jayanteya Gita (Bhagavata Purana); (21) Tulasi Gita; (22) Devi Gita (Devi Bhagavata

Purana); (23) Dharma Vyadha Gita (Mahabharata); (24) Nahusha Gita; (25) Parashara Gita (Mahabharata); (26) Pandava Gita; (27) Pingala Gita; (28) Putra Gita (Varaha Purana); (29) Pranaya Gita (Bhagavata Purana); (30) Bodhya Gita (Mahabharata); (31) Brahma Gita (Skanda Purana); (32) Brahmana Gita (Mahabharata) (33) Bhikshu Gita (Bhagavata Purana); (34) Bhramara Gita (Bhagavata Purana); (35) Manki Gita (Mahabharata); (36) Mahishi Gita (Bhagavata Purana); (37) Yama Gita (Vishnu Purana and Agni Purana); (38) Yajnavalkya Gita (Mahabharata); (39) Yugala Gita (Bhagavata Purana); (40) Rudra Gita (Varaha Purana); (41) Vasishtha Gita (Yogavasishtha Ramayana); (42) Vanara Gita (Parashara Samhita); (43) Vamadeva Gita (Mahabharata); (44) Vichakhnu Gita (Mahabharata); (45) Vibhishana Gita (Adhyatma Ramayana); (46) Vritra Gita (Mahabharata); (47) Venu Gita (Bhagavata Purana); (48) Vyasa Gita (Kurma Purana); (49) Shankara Gita (Vishnudharmottara Purana); (50) Shampaka Gita (Mahabharata); (51) Shanga Gita (Mahabharata); (52) Siddha Gita (Yogavasishtha Ramayana); (53) Suta Gita (Skanda Purana); (54) Hamsa Gita (Mahabharata) and (55) Harita Gita (Mahabharata).

It is possible to feel deluged and confused and I have not listed everything listed in the website as ‘Gita’. Within brackets, I have indicated the larger text to which each Gita belongs. In some cases, the Gita text exists as an independent text and is not part of a larger text. Ashtavakra Gita is an example of this. There is another excellent Gita website maintained by IIT Kanpur.³ This mentions two more—(56) Shruti Gita (Bhagavata Purana) and (57) Rama Gita (Adhyatma Ramayana). With fifty-eight texts (including Bhagavad Gita), where does one start? Obviously, all these texts are not equally important. My favourite from the list is Ashtavakra Gita.

However, notice there are other Gitas in the Mahabharata too: Anu Gita, Atathya Gita, Rishabha Gita, Kama Gita, Dharma Vyadha Gita, Parashara Gita, Bodhya Gita, Brahmana Gita, Manki Gita, Yajnavalkya Gita, Vamadeva Gita, Vichakhnu Gita, Vritra Gita, Shampaka Gita, Shanga Gita, Hamsa Gita and Harita Gita. Other than Bhagavad Gita, that’s another seventeen Gitas in the Mahabharata. But for the moment, let’s not bother about any other text. Let’s stick to the Bhagavad Gita.



¹ Available at: <https://sanskritdocuments.org/sanskrit/giitaa/>. Last accessed on 9 June 2020.

² The sage Kapila features in many texts. He is the founder of the samkhya philosophy. He is the one who burnt down Sagara's sons. He is the son of Kardama and Devahuti.

³ Available at: <https://www.gitasupersite.iitk.ac.in/minigita/texts>. Last accessed on 9 June 2020.

THE MAHABHARATA

The Bhagavad Gita is part of the Mahabharata. It is embedded in the Mahabharata. A complete understanding of the Bhagavad Gita requires some appreciation of the Mahabharata background.

The Mahabharata was composed by Krishna Dvaipayana Vedavyasa. Every once in a while, someone comes along to collate and classify the Vedas. He has the title of Vedavyasa. In our present cycle of creation, there have already been twenty-seven Vedavyasas. This means that we have been through twenty-seven *dvapara yugas* and there was a Vedavyasa in each *dvapara yuga*. To state it a bit more clearly, a *mahayuga* consists of *satya* or *krita yuga*, *treta yuga*, *dvapara yuga* and *kali yuga*. A cycle of creation is known as a *manvantara*, presided over by a Manu. Vaivasvata Manu is the Manu who presides over our current *manvantara*. Every *manvantara* has just over seventy-one *mahayugas* and in our current *manvantara*, we are now in the twenty-eighth *mahayuga*. There was a Vedavyasa in each of the *dvapara yugas* of the preceding twenty-seven *mahayugas*. In our present *mahayuga*, the twenty-eighth, we have passed through *satya yuga*, *treta yuga* and *dvapara yuga* and are now in *kali yuga*. Krishna Dvaipayana Vedavyasa is from the current *mahayuga* and is therefore twenty-eighth in the line of Vedavyases. Vedavyasa was his title. His name was Krishna Dvaipayana; Krishna, because he was dark (krishna means dark) and Dvaipayana because he was born on an island (*dvipa* means island).

After collating and classifying the Vedas, Krishna Dvaipayana Vedavyasa composed the Mahabharata. It would be wrong to say he wrote it. Writing did not exist at the time. The Mahabharata is in Sanskrit and so is the Bhagavad Gita. (There are retellings of the Mahabharata in other languages too, but I don't have those in mind.) The Mahabharata is believed

to have 100,000 shlokas. Roughly, each shloka is around twenty words. Thus, the Mahabharata amounts to around two million words. It is huge. There were different versions of the Sanskrit Mahabharata in different parts of the country, differing from each other in minor detail. From 1916 to 1966, the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) in Pune sifted through all these (more than 1,200) different versions and produced what is inferred to be closest to the original text. I use the expression ‘inferred’, as there is subjectivity in identifying what might have been the original. This text is known as BORI’s Critical Edition. The sections of the Mahabharata are known as parva, meaning, branch. When the Kauravas fought with the Pandavas in the Kurukshetra War, most people know that the war lasted for eighteen days and that Bhishma was the general of the Kaurava army for the first ten days. After that, he was brought down and Dronacharya took over as general. Bhishma Parva covers the period when Bhishma was the general, and the Bhagavad Gita is part of Bhishma Parva.

If you check against BORI’s Critical Edition, Section 63 is about the Bhagavad Gita. It is named after the Bhagavad Gita and is a sub-parva of Bhishma Parva. It has 994 shlokas and twenty-seven chapters. Those who know a little bit about the Bhagavad Gita will be surprised. Isn’t the Bhagavad Gita supposed to have 700 shlokas and eighteen chapters? Indeed, the Bhagavad Gita does have 700 shlokas and eighteen chapters, but the sub-parva named after the Bhagavad Gita has a little bit more than what we know as the Bhagavad Gita text. As an author, Vedavyasa had a liking for the dramatic. The sub-parva begins on a very dramatic note. Dhritarashtra was blind and Sanjaya was bestowed with divine vision so that he could describe the events to Dhritarashtra. Dhritarashtra is waiting to hear about the war. Not an arrow has been shot so far. The sub-parva begins with Sanjaya telling Dhritarashtra that Bhishma is dead. What? How? When did this happen? Dhritarashtra is impatient to hear about this tragic event and so are we. With our interest having thus been kindled, Vedavyasa now plunges into a description of the preparations for war. He has told us about Bhishma’s death before describing the progress of the war. There are a few chapters where we are told about these preparations. The Bhagavad Gita ‘proper’ starts after that. I just told you that Section 63 has twenty-seven chapters. The first nine of these are about such preparations and preliminaries. The tenth chapter of this sub-parva then starts with the famous words: Dhritarashtra asked, ‘O Sanjaya! Having gathered on the

holy plains of Kurukshetra, wanting to fight, what did my sons and the sons of Pandu do?’ Those are the opening lines of the Bhagavad Gita and yes, the Bhagavad Gita does have eighteen chapters.

If your edition of the Bhagavad Gita is an independent book and you are not reading it as part of the Mahabharata, the book may begin with something known as *Gita dhyana* (meditation on the Gita). This is an invocation addressed to the Bhagavad Gita itself. This will say things like, ‘All the Upanishads are like cows, Partha [Arjuna] is the calf and the learned drink the milk that is the great ambrosia of the Gita.’ The book may also end with something known as *Gita mahatmya* (greatness of the Gita). This will say things like the following: ‘Those who wish to cross the ocean that is the world can happily use the boat that is the Gita. He who has not repeatedly heard and studied the Gita, yet desires liberation, will be laughed at by children. But those who hear it and study it are not humans. They are certainly like the gods.’ The *Gita dhyana* and *Gita mahatmya* aren’t part of the original text of the Bhagavad Gita. They were added much later. Indeed, the *Gita mahatmya* is from the Varaha Purana. In your book, each chapter may also end with a statement along the lines of, ‘Thus ends such and such chapter, titled such and such, in the conversation between Shri Krishna and Arjuna.’ These are known as colophons and these were also added later.

Adi Shankaracharya (788–820 CE) wrote a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. The commentary started with 2.10. Whenever I use an expression like this, it will mean second chapter, tenth verse. The first number will refer to the chapter, while the second number will refer to the shloka. There is no ‘teaching’ before 2.11. Therefore, there was no need for a commentary for the earlier sections. Because Adi Shankaracharya wrote a commentary, 2.10 onwards, the text became standardized. I said that around the country, there were minor variations in the Mahabharata text. Unlike the Mahabharata, except for the first chapter, the Bhagavad Gita is standardized throughout the country. The script used may not always be Devanagari, but the Sanskrit will be uniform. However, there may be minor variations in the first chapter. These are very minor. Actually, I know of only two variations. First, in 1.8, depending on the version, Jayadratha may or may not be mentioned. Second, around 1.28/1.29, there may be some difference in numbering. In this case, the text will be the same. It is just that shlokas may be numbered differently. Therefore, in some versions, the first chapter will have forty-six shlokas. In others, it will have forty-seven. Accordingly, the

entire Bhagavad Gita may have 699 shlokas or 700 shlokas. However, forty-seven shlokas in the first chapter and 700 shlokas for the entire Bhagavad Gita are more common. The numbering may also differ in some other chapters. But the text will be uniform.

Swami Vivekananda wrote on the Gita. He wrote separate monographs on karma yoga, raja yoga and jnana yoga, all worth reading. In 1897, he delivered several lectures on the Gita and Vedanta and a summary was written down as ‘Thoughts on the Gita’.¹ There is one particular statement of his that has always puzzled me. It is about Shankaracharya having authored the Gita. He says:

The book known as the Gita forms a part of the Mahabharata. To understand the Gita properly, several things are very important to know. First, whether it formed a part of the Mahabharata, i.e., whether the authorship attributed to Veda-Vyasa was true, or if it was merely interpolated within the great epic; ... Another point is, the book, Gita, had not been much known to the generality of people before Shankaracharya made it famous by writing his great commentary on it. ...Some infer that Shankaracharya was the author of the Gita, and that it was he who foisted it into the body of the Mahabharata.

I am not aware of anyone who suggested it seriously. But there are people who have taken Swami Vivekananda’s statement seriously and have authored entire books around it.² Swami Vivekananda was, of course, familiar with Shankaracharya’s commentary. Many people are not. In justifying the need for his commentary, this is what Adi Shankaracharya wrote:

This famous Gita-Sastra is an epitome of the essentials of the whole Vedic teaching; and its meaning is very difficult to understand. Though, to afford a clear view of its teaching, it has been explained word by word and sentence by sentence, and its import critically examined by several commentators, still I have found that to the laity it appears to teach diverse and quite contradictory doctrines. I propose, therefore, to write a brief commentary with a view to determine its precise meaning.³

Since Adi Shankaracharya wrote this about several commentators before him, he couldn’t have authored the Bhagavad Gita. The use of the word ‘several’ also means the Bhagavad Gita wasn’t unknown before Shankaracharya’s time. However, if one asserts that Adi Shankaracharya and his commentary popularized the Bhagavad Gita much more, that is a reasonable proposition. By the way, Adi Shankaracharya’s commentary also mentions Anu Gita.

What does it mean to say the Bhagavad Gita was interpolated into the Mahabharata later? The dating of the Kurukshetra War is one kind of dating

issue. We will not get into that, because it doesn't concern us. The authorship of the Mahabharata is, however, another kind of dating issue and that does concern us. The Mahabharata itself tells that there were additions and embellishments to the text and that the text was expanded over time. There was an earlier segment, let's call it Mahabharata (O), 'O' standing for original. There was a final text, let's call it Mahabharata (F), 'F' standing for final. These things are difficult to date with any precision. Therefore, Mahabharata (O) probably dates to 500 BCE, while Mahabharata (F) probably dates to 500 CE. This is a range of one thousand years. Most scholars will agree with this range. At best, some will say 400 BCE for Mahabharata (O) and 400 CE for Mahabharata (F). There have been attempts to identify later layers and distinguish them from older layers, such as through examining the evolution of the Sanskrit language. But all such attempts are inherently subjective.

Let me give you a quote from the Bhagavad Gita. This is from 10.35. In this section, Krishna is telling Arjuna how he is the most important among various categories. For example, among all shining bodies, he is the sun. Among all the gods, he is Indra. Among all the mountains, he is Meru. Among all animals, he is the lion. Among all rivers, he is Ganga, and so on. You get the general idea. That bit of 10.35 states: 'Among months, I am Margashirsha.' Margashirsha is also known as Agrahayana, roughly from around 21 November to 20 December. Calendars differ in different parts of the country, but most people will say the calendar begins with the month of Chaitra, roughly from 21 March to 20 April. Why would Krishna imply that Margashirsha was the most important among all the months? That can only be because the calendar then started with the month of Margashirsha. Notice the word Agrahayana literally means the first month of the year. Therefore, when this bit of the Bhagavad Gita was composed, Margashirsha (named after the *nakshatra* Mrigashira) was the first month of the year and the year started with the full moon in the month of Margashirsha. Notice also that many important festivals are still concentrated in Margashirsha. There are reasons why it is difficult to use astronomical data to date events, such as the date of the Kurukshetra War. Astronomical calculations moved from *nakshatras* to *rashis* (signs of the zodiac), from lunar months to solar months. Lunar months sometimes started with *puṇnima* (the day of the full moon), sometimes with *amavasya* (the day of the new moon). Therefore, as a last resort, one has to make assumptions, which are subjective. Subject to

this, a respected astronomer named V. B. Ketkar gives us an answer to a question.⁴ When was Margashirsha the first month of the year? His answer gives us a range between 699 BCE and 452 BCE. This part of the Bhagavad Gita is therefore as old as Mahabharata (O). Sanskrit grammar evolved over a period of time, and after Panini, came to assume a certain structure, especially in what is called classical Sanskrit. We haven't been able to date Panini satisfactorily. Sixth century BCE, fifth century BCE or fourth century BCE are reasonable guesses. In the Bhagavad Gita, you will find न (meaning 'no') used. In classical Sanskrit, you wouldn't have used the word न in that way. You would have used the word न, which also means 'no'. I can cite other linguistic evidence, such as the use of the past tense. These parts of the Bhagavad Gita were therefore written before classical Sanskrit became the norm. So, fifth century BCE, fourth century BCE, third century BCE, or something like that.

These parts of the Bhagavad Gita, therefore, pre-date Mahabharata (F) and belong to more or less the same period as Mahabharata (O). Couldn't there have been a Bhagavad Gita (O) or original, and a Bhagavad Gita (F) or final, with these earlier sections belonging to Bhagavad Gita (O)? Couldn't there have been multiple authors of the Bhagavad Gita? This is an old issue, discussed threadbare, but never seems to go away. The dead horse keeps kicking every once in a while. I will give you a quote from a learned scholar⁵:

The question whether the Gita was composed by one or more authors has been a matter of dispute among scholars. Some Western scholars, supported by a few Indian scholars, have advanced various theories of the multiple authorship of the Gita. Firstly, they argue, the poem differs in style from beginning to end, so that the Gita cannot be regarded as the work of a single author on consideration of its metrical form. Secondly, the poem attempts to reconcile many different points of view, so that it abounds in 'contradictions', 'puzzling anomalies' and 'philosophical inconsistencies' and the different meanings given to the different words are indicative of its 'patchwork origin'. There is, however, no agreement among the different scholars regarding the size and form... With the development of tests of homogeneity in the theory of statistics, it has now become possible to apply objective tests to the determination of authorship problems. A statistical study of the Anustubh style of the *adhyayas* of the Gita undertaken by this author shows that the variations of this style as between the eighteen *adhyayas* are not significant to justify the assumption of its multiple authorship... The Gita is undoubtedly the work of a single author, who worked out a broad synthesis of the schools of philosophic thought known at the time.

Those with a scientific and statistical bent of mind should read this book. An even better idea is to read the paper M.R. Yardi published in 1977–78, which has more of the statistical detail than his book on the Bhagavad

Gita.⁶ Indeed, you should then splice this with a similar study he did for the entire Mahabharata.⁷ So as not to maintain the suspense, in case you don't have the time or inclination to read too much, there was a single author for the Bhagavad Gita and five different authors for the Mahabharata. Naturally, this is probabilistic, not deterministic. Nothing can be confidently asserted with certainty. But that's the way science works. There was a Mahabharata (O) and a Mahabharata (F). But there is no Bhagavad Gita (O) or Bhagavad Gita (F). The Bhagavad Gita is an integrated whole. These days, people are often more familiar with Latin than with Sanskrit. After a thirteenth/fourteenth century philosopher and theologian named William of Ockham, there is a principle known as Ockham's razor. In Latin, one variant of this reads, '*Pluralitas non-est ponenda sine necessitate*'. (When choosing between two competing theories, choose the one with fewer assumptions.) The simplest theory is that the Bhagavad Gita had a single author. By the way, M.R. Yardi did his analysis when artificial intelligence (AI) couldn't be used for such work. AI has now been used to vivisect William Shakespeare's works, such as 'Henry VIII'. Who knows, in the future, AI may also be used to refine the Yardi kind of work.

Therefore, a single author composed the Bhagavad Gita around fifth century BCE. Couldn't the Bhagavad Gita have been authored as an independent text that was spliced into Mahabharata (F) later? I suspect many people who read the Bhagavad Gita don't read the Bhagavad Gita sub-parva. I already told you the sub-parva has twenty-seven chapters, eighteen of which are the Bhagavad Gita. The first nine chapters of this sub-parva seamlessly lead to the tenth chapter, which is the first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita. There is no break in continuity between the ninth and tenth chapters of the sub-parva. The Bhagavad Gita is part of Mahabharata (F). Lest we forget, shlokas from the Bhagavad Gita are also found elsewhere in the Mahabharata, sometimes with minor variations.

A final question before we move on to the next chapter. What is the oldest surviving manuscript of the Bhagavad Gita? Transmission was usually oral, not written. Even when written down, the manuscript may not have survived. These two statements qualify the question. I have already told you that BORI's Critical Edition was produced after sifting through a large number of manuscripts. For Bhishma Parva, and therefore for the Bhagavad Gita, the scholar entrusted with its editing was Professor Shripad Krishna Belvalkar, who was earlier with the Deccan College, and then with

BORI. In his detailed notes published in 1945/1946 and reprinted in 1968, he gave us a list of around 200 manuscripts for Bhishma Parva. The earliest manuscript was from Adyar Library, Madras (now Chennai), dated 1506 CE. But this is for Bhishma Parva and the Bhagavad Gita is only one part of that. For the Bhagavad Gita, there was a Kashmiri version dated 1489 CE. There is also a 1492 CE Bhagavad Gita manuscript at the Bodleian Library, Oxford University. In answer to the question, if one says late fifteenth century, that's perfectly acceptable. However, some old manuscripts from Java, Indonesia, which go back to the tenth century CE, do cite several shlokas from the Bhagavad Gita, though not always exactly as they occur in the text.



¹Advaita Ashrama. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. 4*. Available at: <https://advaitaashrama.org/cw/content.php>. Last accessed on 9 June 2020.

²Lord Meghnad Desai is such an example. Desai, Meghnad. *Who Wrote the Bhagavadgita? A Secular Inquiry into a Sacred Text*. HarperCollins, 2014.

³Sastry, Alladi Mahadeva. *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Sri Sankaracharya*. Samata Books, Madras, 1977, first published in 1897. The bit I have quoted is from Adi Shankaracharya's introduction to his commentary.

⁴Ketkar, V.B. *Indian and Foreign Chronology*. Bombay, 1921.

⁵Yardi, M.R. *The Bhagavadgita as a Synthesis*. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune. 1991. In addition to an excellent introduction, this is a very good translation of the Bhagavad Gita in English.

⁶Yardi, M.R. 'Theories of multiple authorship of the Bhagavadgita', *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, Diamond Jubilee Volume, 1977–78.

⁷Yardi, M.R. *The Mahabharata: Its Genesis and Growth (A Statistical Study)*. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune, 1986.

2

SANSKRIT AND POETRY

Why should we be more familiar with Latin than with Sanskrit? Sanskrit is a beautiful language and the Bhagavad Gita is composed in Sanskrit. Sanskrit is a spoken language, as most languages are. Rendering into writing came later. Even when a Sanskrit text started to be written down, the script varied from one part of the country to another. It wasn't uniformly Devanagari. However, Devanagari is used much more now and most people are familiar with it. There is something known as International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) that Westerners normally use. This uses the Roman script, with diacritical marks added. The diacritical mark can be a horizontal line at the top of the letter, such as to distinguish a long vowel from a short vowel. Alternatively, the diacritical mark can be a dot placed below the letter or a squiggle or apostrophe placed above the letter. The diacritical rendering of the Sanskrit alphabet will thus be the following. One needs to be observant. It is very easy to miss the dots, especially when they are placed below the letters.

अ	a	आ	ā	इ	i	ई	ī
उ	u	ऊ	ū	ऋ	ṛ	ॠ	ṝ
ऌ	Ḍ	ॡ	Ḍ̄	ए	e	ऐ	ai
ओ	o	औ	au	०	ṁ	ः	ḥ
ँ	~	ऽ	'				

क	ka	ख	kha	ग	ga	घ	gha	ङ	ṅ
च	ca	छ	cha	ज	ja	झ	jha	ञ	ñ
ट	ṭa	ठ	ṭha	ड	ḍa	ढ	ḍha	ण	ṇ
त	ta	थ	tha	द	da	ध	dha	न	na
प	pa	फ	pha	ब	ba	भ	bha	म	ma
य	ya	र	ra	ल	la	व	va		
श	ś	ष	ṣ	स	sa	ह	ha		

I have already given a translation of the first shloka of the Bhagavad Gita. ‘O Sanjaya! Having gathered on the holy plains of Kurukshetra, wanting to fight, what did my sons and the sons of Pandu do?’ There are four people who speak in the Bhagavad Gita: Krishna, Arjuna, Sanjaya and Dhritarashtra. Of the 700 shlokas, 574 are spoken by Krishna, perfectly understandable; eighty-four shlokas are spoken by Arjuna and forty-one shlokas are spoken by Sanjaya. That is a total of 699. An often unnoticed, but obvious, fact is that Dhritarashtra speaks only one shloka in the entire Bhagavad Gita. This happens to be the shloka I have just quoted, the opening lines of the Bhagavad Gita.

धर्मक्षेत्रे कुरुक्षेत्रे समवेता युयुत्सवः।
मामकाः पाण्डवाश्चैव किमकुर्वत सञ्जय॥

In IAST, this will be *dharmakṣētrē kuruṣētrē samavētā yuyutsavaḥ māmakāḥ pāṇḍavāścaiva kimakurvata sañjaya*. Different people have different tastes and preferences. They have their biases. As far as my biases go, I prefer Devanagari to IAST. Anyone familiar with any Indian language will also probably prefer Devanagari. I find it to be more natural and less artificial. Therefore, from now on, when I quote from the Bhagavad Gita, it will always be in Devanagari, not IAST. But there are books that will give you the text of the Bhagavad Gita in IAST. I have mentioned the website on the Gita maintained by IIT Kanpur earlier, known as the Gita Supersite. This will give you multiple Indian scripts in which you can read the Bhagavad Gita. The language will be Sanskrit. But Sanskrit can be written

in multiple scripts, not just Devanagari. Through the Gita Supersite, depending on your preferences, you can choose your script.

I think the Bhagavad Gita should be read in Sanskrit. It is a beautiful language and no translation can do justice to the original. There are of course plenty of translations of the Bhagavad Gita in English. The first one was done by Charles Wilkins (1749–1836) in 1785.⁸ Would you like to know how Charles Wilkins translated this first verse, ‘Tell me, O Sanjaya, what the people of my own party, and those of the Pandus, who are assembled at Kurukshetra resolved for war, have been doing?’ Charles Wilkins wanted to translate the Mahabharata too, but couldn’t complete it. An international bibliography of the Bhagavad Gita was published in 1983.⁹ This covered the period 1785–1979, 1785 being determined by the Charles Wilkins translation. This book had 2,795 entries in fifty languages. People sometimes say there are around 200 translations of the Bhagavad Gita in English. This is a list of English language translations in print. With the Internet, audio-visual and other kinds of technology, I think the number could be much more. I myself did a translation in 2005, reprinted in 2019, also incorporated into the larger translation I did of the Mahabharata.¹⁰ While doing this, I listed sixty-six translations in English and I didn’t include all of them. I suspect the number of translations in English, not just in print, must be close to 500. By the way, whenever I quote a translation of the Bhagavad Gita, unless I say it is a quote from someone else’s translation, it will be a quote from my translation. Since I did a translation, it is natural for me to prefer my translation over those of others.

If there are so many translations, why can’t I read the Bhagavad Gita in English? Why do I have to read it in Sanskrit? Translations are always imperfect. They can never replicate the original. Even when they are good translations, they are transcreations. For anyone who knows any Indian language, Sanskrit is not a difficult language to learn, except that it is often badly taught. I have already said that Sanskrit language flows freely, it doesn’t like to stop. Therefore, as with *sandhi*, words tend to join each other. This can make a particular shloka seem difficult. Once the words are broken up, the shloka is not that difficult. This breaking up of the words is known as पदच्छेद (breaking up the words). Let’s see how this works.

धर्मक्षेत्रे कुरुक्षेत्रे समवेता युयुत्सवः।
मामकाः पाण्डवाश्चैव किमकुर्वत सञ्जय॥

This is the first shloka of the Bhagavad Gita. After पदच्छेद this becomes,

धर्म-क्षेत्रे कुरु-क्षेत्रे समवेताः युयुत्सवः।
मामकाः पाण्डवाः च एव किम् अकुर्वत सञ्जय॥

But there is an additional complication. Consider, मार्जारः दुग्धं पिबति। (The cat is drinking milk.) This is what that Sanskrit sentence says. In the English language, the order of the words has to follow a certain structure. The subject has to be in a certain place, the verb has to be in a certain place, the object has to be in a certain place, and so on. The structure of Sanskrit grammar is so logical that the order of words does not matter. दुग्धं पिबति मार्जारः still means ‘The cat is drinking milk.’ If you are not familiar with this, you might be tempted to interpret this as, ‘Milk is drinking the cat.’ Since we are typically familiar with the expected positions of words in English sentences, we find Sanskrit sentence structures complicated. That’s where अन्वय (the logical ordering of words in a sentence) comes in. After पदच्छेद, once one has done अन्वय, every shloka of the Bhagavad Gita will become much simpler. For that first shloka, अन्वय will now give us सञ्जय धर्म-क्षेत्रे कुरु-क्षेत्रे युयुत्सवः समवेताः मामकाः पाण्डवाः च एव किम् अकुर्वत? The subject is in the right place, the object is in the right place; not at all difficult to understand. The trick to understanding any Sanskrit sentence is to first identify and grasp the verb. Is it the singular, dual or plural? What is the tense? After that, pin down the subject. The rest will follow. In this particular case, अकुर्वत is in the imperfect past (tense) and plural. The subject is मामकाः पाण्डवाः च— my sons and the sons of Pandu. The bits start to fall into place.

Still not convinced? Let’s take an example that is seemingly more complicated, 11-6% पश्यादित्यान्वसून् रुद्रानश्विनौ मरुतस्तथा। बहून्यदृष्टपूर्वाणि पश्याश्चर्याणि भारत॥ After पदच्छेद this becomes, पश्य

आदित्यान् वसून् रूद्रान् अश्विनौ मरुताः तथा। बहूनि अदृष्ट-पूर्वाणि पश्य
आश्चर्याणि भारत॥ अन्वय will now give us भारत आदित्यान् वसून् रूद्रान्
अश्विनौ तथा मरुताः पश्य अदृष्ट-पूर्वाणि बहूनि आश्चर्याणि पश्य। And we can
now translate, ‘O descendant of Bharata! See the *adityas*, the *vasus*, the
rudras, the *ashvins* and the *maruts*. See the many wonderful things you
have never seen before.’

The Sanskrit of the Bhagavad Gita is generally simple. It isn’t like that
of classical Sanskrit literature. That is the reason a website uses shlokas
from the Bhagavad Gita to teach Sanskrit.¹¹ For example, गच्छति is the
third person present tense singular for ‘to go’. As a part of 6.37,
अप्राप्य योगसंसिद्धिं कां गतिं कृष्ण गच्छति? ‘O Krishna! If a person has
not been able to obtain success in yoga, where does he go?’ In this way, it
uses shlokas and bits of shlokas from the Bhagavad Gita to teach Sanskrit
grammar.

No matter how good the translation is, if you do not the read the
Bhagavad Gita in Sanskrit, you will miss quite a lot. And you will certainly
miss the beauty of its poetry. Till a certain period in history, all Sanskrit
works were generally in poetry or verse, not in prose. The Vedangas are
limbs or auxiliaries and the six Vedangas are *shiksha* (articulation and
pronunciation), *chhanda* (prosody), *vyakarana* (grammar), *nirukta*
(etymology), *jyotisha* (astronomy) and *kalpa* (rituals). These are needed to
understand not just the Vedas, but also Sanskrit works. *Chhanda* is one of
these. *Chhanda* can be translated as metre and means something that is
pleasing and delightful. *Chhanda shastra* is the study of metres or prosody.
Sanskrit poetry wasn’t about what we tend to identify as poetry today—the
act of rhyming. *Chhanda* begins with the concept of *akshara*, akin to, but
not exactly identical with, the English concept of syllable, that is, part of a
word with a single vowel sound. Other than possessing a single vowel
sound, an *akshara* must not begin with a vowel. *Aksharas* can be *hrasva* or
laghu (light or L) and *guru* (heavy or G). Simply stated, with a short vowel,
the *akshara* is L and with a long vowel, the *akshara* is G. There are some
additional conditions, but we needn’t get into those. Every verse consists of
four quatrains (*pada*), the word *pada* meaning one quarter. Depending on
how many *aksharas* there are in a *pada* and the distribution of those
aksharas into L and G, there were a variety of metres. Depending on the
subject and the mood, the poet consciously chose a metre. Analysed in this

way, there were more than 1,300 different metres. One of the most popular was something called *anushtubh*. This features prominently in the Valmiki Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas. The bulk of the Bhagavad Gita is also in *anushtubh*. The *anushtubh* structure meant eight *aksharas* in each *pada*, with a total of thirty-two *aksharas*. In addition, for *anushtubh*, in every *pada*, the fifth *akshara* would have to be L and the sixth *akshara* would have to be G. In classical Sanskrit literature, conditions were also applied to the seventh *akshara*, but such refinements came later.

Consonants have no power in Sanskrit. That's the reason the word for consonant, व्यञ्जन, means condiment or seasoning. They aren't the main course. The real power of the sound in Sanskrit is with a vowel (स्वर). In 10.33, अक्षराणामकारोऽस्मि— 'Among *aksharas*, I am the letter अ.' Without अ, no consonant can be pronounced. म = म् + अ. Try pronouncing म्— not म. It is impossible.

धर्मक्षेत्रे कुरुक्षेत्रे समवेता युयुत्सवः।
मामकाः पाण्डवाश्चैव किमकुर्वत सञ्जय॥

That's our standard first shloka of the Bhagavad Gita. If you are not familiar with Sanskrit metres, you may find what I am doing next a bit strange, especially the way I am breaking up joint consonants. धर् मक् षेत् रे कु रूक् षेत् रे स म वे ता यु युत् स
वः मा म काः पाण् ड वाश् चै व कि म कुरु व त स्त्र ज य. Four *padas* with eight *aksharas* in each *pada*, adding up to a total of thirty-two *aksharas*— you may have read that first verse hundreds of times, without realizing or appreciating it. It gets better. Try the fifth *akshara* of each *pada*. As expected, it is L. Try the sixth *akshara* of each *pada*: as expected, it is G. Since you are not expected to become skilled in understanding Sanskrit prosody, you may not have understood everything I have said. But you should have got the general idea. We routinely chant mantras without always realizing they are in *anushtubh*.

वक्रतुण्ड महाकाय सूर्यकोटि समप्रभा।
निर्विघ्नं कुरु मे देव सर्वकार्येषु सर्वदा॥

सरस्वति महाभागे विद्ये कमललोचने।
विद्यारूपे विशालाक्षि विद्यां देहि नमोस्तुते॥

All these are examples of *anushtubh*. More than 92 per cent of the shlokas in the Bhagavad Gita are in various variants of *anushtubh*. For the most part, other metres in the Bhagavad Gita are *trishtubh* (त्रिष्टुभ्) or its variants. *Trishtubh* has eleven syllables in each line, with forty-four *aksharas* in the entire shloka. When a poet changed the metre, it was a conscious decision reflecting a change in mood or sentiment. It is easy to figure out why many such *tristhubh* shlokas should be in Chapter 11. But it also happens in a place like 2.5.

Translations of the Bhagavad Gita in English can be in prose or in verse. I have already mentioned Edwin Arnold's translation—that is in verse. There are other translations in verse too. There is one such recent work by Amit Majumdar.¹² But even if the translation is in verse, and even if the translation has good poetry, it will never be able to capture the beauty of the Bhagavad Gita's poetry. It will re-create. To be faithful with the poetical form, it will take liberties with the text. That's the reason I keep saying that one should read it in the Sanskrit. Otherwise, one might miss out on some wonderful poetry, not just the one in Chapter 11.

Besides, however accurate, no translator will be able to convey every nuance Sanskrit possesses. 2.23 is a famous shloka—

नैनं छिन्दन्ति शस्त्राणि नैनं दहति पावकः।
न चैनं क्लेदयन्त्यापो न शोषयति मारुतः॥

‘Weapons cannot cut this. Fire cannot burn this. Nor can water wet this. And the wind cannot dry this.’ There is nothing wrong with the translation, but why use these words? Is it because weapons were made out of metals and these came from the earth? And we have fire, water and wind. In other words, four of the five elements are covered and the fifth—space—exists everywhere. The word पावकः does mean fire. The vocabulary of Sanskrit language is extremely rich. Without looking at my dictionary, I can rattle off ten synonyms for Pavaka, ten names for ‘fire’. If I look at my dictionary/thesaurus, it will increase to twenty-five. Why choose Pavaka rather than one of the others? In Sanskrit, the meanings of words are

determined by the verbal roots. That's the reason a word has multiple meanings. For instance, अजगर does mean a python or boa constrictor. But the verbal root gives us something that swallows a goat (अज). Therefore, if something else, like a crocodile, swallows a goat, there is nothing wrong in calling it अजगर। Pavaka is something that purifies. Hence, when I see the word पावकः, it not only registers as fire, but as something that purifies. Every translator will probably use the word fire when translating Pavaka, but won't be able to convey the nuance I just described. In a similar way, शस्त्रम् (शस्त्राणि is the plural) certainly means weapon, but it also has the nuance of a weapon made out of iron and steel. You get the general idea. In translations, you miss these nuances.

Because a Sanskrit word has multiple meanings, a translator will be forced to choose, perhaps even to interpret a little. There will be subjectivity. Don't get me wrong. In the vast majority of cases, the meaning will be straightforward. No deep philosophical question will be involved. At best, someone translating into English will choose a word from a set of possible words. Most translations, except when there are questions of philosophical interpretation, will be permutations and combinations of each other. However, there will always be the odd example. Let me take an example from the first chapter. As I have said before, there is no teaching in the first chapter. It is a simple description. There shouldn't be any difficulties. In 1.10, we get अपर्याप्तं तदस्माकं बलं भीष्माभिरक्षितम्। पर्याप्तं त्विदमेतेषां बलं भीमाभिरक्षितम्॥ With the पदच्छेद and अन्वय, अस्माकम् भीष्म-अभिरक्षितम् तत् बलम् अपर्याप्तम्। एतेषाम् तु भीम-अभिरक्षितम् इदम् बलम् पर्याप्तम्॥ Our army, protected by Bhishma, and their army, protected by Bhima—that much is clear. What does the word पर्याप्तम् (पर्याप्तं is a different way of writing it, following some grammatical conventions) mean? It means sufficient, limited. Both meanings are permissible. Our army, protected by Bhishma, is unlimited. And their army, protected by Bhima, is limited. In the Kurukshetra battle, the Pandavas had seven *akshauhinis* and the Kauravas had eleven *akshauhinis*. An *akshauhini* is a unit of the army, consisting of 21,870 chariots, 21,870 elephants, 65,610 horses and 1,09,350 foot-soldiers. In relative terms, the Kaurava army was larger. Thus, in that comparison, it is natural to describe the Kaurava army as unlimited (अपर्याप्तं is the opposite of पर्याप्तं) and the Pandava army as limited. But what if we take पर्याप्तं to mean sufficient? Then, the Pandava army becomes sufficient and the Kaurava army becomes insufficient. With such a translation, the

description involves a value judgement that the Pandava army is sufficient to vanquish the Kaurava army, but the Kaurava army is insufficient to do the reverse. In other words, in this translation, Duryodhana, who is describing all this to Dronacharya, has a fear of losing. My translation of 1.10 is, ‘That army of ours, protected by Bhishma, is unlimited. But this army of theirs, protected by Bhima, is limited.’

I hope you did not miss the use of the words ‘that’ and ‘this’ and their significance. This is Duryodhana describing the respective armies to Dronacharya. When describing the Kaurava army, he uses the word तत्— that. When describing the Pandava army, he effectively uses the word एतत्— this. In many translations, these two words are glossed over and not even translated. In between the two armies, where were Duryodhana and Dronacharya standing? Clearly, they were close to the Pandava army and far away from the Kaurava army, not quite what you would expect. You would normally expect Duryodhana and Dronacharya to be standing in front of the Kaurava army. You get the same impression from 1.3. पश्यैतां पाण्डुपुत्राणामाचार्य महतीं चमूम्। व्यूढां द्रुपदपुत्रेण तव शिष्येण धीमता॥ ‘O Teacher! Look at this great army of the Pandavas, assembled in army formation by the son of Drupada, your talented student.’ ‘This’ is again being used for the Pandava army. On the other hand, when Krishna places the chariot between the two armies, in 1.25, he uses the word ‘this’ for the Kaurava army. भीष्मद्रोणप्रमुखतः सर्वेषां च महीक्षिताम्। उवाच पार्थ पश्यैतान्समवेतान्कुरूनिति॥ ‘In front of Bhishma, Drona and all the other rulers of the earth [Krishna placed the chariot] and said, “O Partha! Look at those of the Kuru clan who are assembled here”.’ Krishna and Arjuna were in front of the Kaurava army and Duryodhana and Dronacharya were in front of the Pandava army. Not quite what you would expect and it tells us quite a bit about the dharma of war followed then. Until conch shells were blown and trumpets sounded to announce the beginning of fighting in the morning, you were friends. When they were sounded again in the evening to proclaim the end of fighting for the day, you became friends again. That was the dharma of war and there were also rules on who should fight with whom. Such norms are not necessarily observed today, but they were then.

Thanks to all these reasons, I hope I have been able to persuade you to read the Bhagavad Gita in Sanskrit. As far as translations in English are concerned, it is best to avoid those in verse, unless one loves poetry. Verse translations take liberties. Among the 500-odd translations that are

available, take your pick from amongst the ones in prose. But preferably, verify the authenticity of the translation by reading the Sanskrit version. Since the Bhagavad Gita is about the metaphysical/spiritual, there will be some subjectivity of interpretation in the translation. There are several commentaries (भाष्य) on the Bhagavad Gita. Among the more famous ones are those by Adi Shankaracharya, Abhinavagupta (950 CE–1016 CE), Ramanuja (1017–1137 CE), Madhvacharya (1238–1317 CE) and Vallabhacharya (1479–1531 CE). Commentaries take one beyond the translation, though translators often use one or more of the commentaries. Commentaries elucidate the layers in the text and take us beyond it. Therefore, for understanding the Bhagavad Gita, commentaries are essential. Once one's understanding and expertise have proceeded beyond Bhagavad Gita 101, it is a good idea to take a look at these commentaries. The ones I have just mentioned, with their translations, are available on the Gita Supersite.



⁸Wilkins, Charles. *Bhagvat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon*. Nourse, London, 1785. The Preface was written by Warren Hastings.

⁹Kapoor, Jagdish Chander. *Bhagavat-Gita: An International Bibliography of 1785–1979 Imprints*. Garland Publishing, New York, 1983.

¹⁰Debroy, Bibek. *The Bhagavad Gita*, Penguin India, 2005, reprinted in 2019.

¹¹Available at: <http://www.learnsanskrit.org/start/verbs/present>. Last accessed on 9 June 2020.

¹²Majumdar, Amit. *Godsong: A Verse Translation of the Bhagavad-Gita*. Penguin Books, 2018.

KRISHNA AS A HISTORICAL PERSON

Even if not omnipresent, Krishna is present in several places in the Mahabharata. In the Bhagavad Gita, however, Krishna is omnipresent. Without Krishna, there would be no Bhagavad Gita. But before we talk about Krishna as a historical person, let us digress a bit on the texts.

I have already indirectly mentioned the Puranas. The word ‘Purana’ means old, ancient. The Puranas are old texts, usually referred to in conjunction with *Itihasa* (the Ramayana and the Mahabharata). In popular perception, Vedavyasa composed the Mahabharata and the Hari Vamsha. Hari Vamsha means ‘Hari’s lineage’. The text known as Hari Vamsha is part of BORI’s Critical Edition of the Mahabharata, but it was published separately. It is regarded as an epilogue or appendix to the Mahabharata. Sometimes, it is loosely referred to as a Purana, though it is not quite a Purana. The major Puranas are eighteen in number. In popular perception, after composing the Mahabharata in 100,000 shlokas, Vedavyasa composed the eighteen Puranas in 400,000 shlokas. The names of the eighteen major Puranas are the following, with the number of shlokas indicated within brackets: (1) Agni (15,400); (2) Bhagavata (18,000); (3) Brahma (10,000); (4) Brahmanda (12,000); (5) Brahmavaivarta (18,000); (6) Garuda (19,000); (7) Kurma (17,000); (8) Linga (11,000); (9) Markandeya (9,000); (10) Matsya (14,000); (11) Narada (25,000); (12) Padma (55,000); (13) Shiva (24,000); (14) Skanda (81,100); (15) Vamana (10,000); (16) Varaha (24,000); (17) Vayu (24,000); and (18) Vishnu (23,000). Only some aspects and incidents of Krishna’s life are covered in the Mahabharata. Others can be found in Hari Vamsha and the Puranas. Knowing about these incidents and events is not essential to form an understanding about the Bhagavad Gita. But I think it helps to understand the background. With time and

inclination to read only one more text, other than the Mahabharata, I would pick the Bhagavata Purana. It has many principles of Vaishnava philosophy (other than incidents from Krishna's life) and builds on the Bhagavad Gita. With a little bit more time and inclination, I would add Hari Vamsha, Brahmavaivarta Purana and Vishnu Purana to the list.

These texts aren't essential; however, I do think reading the Mahabharata is essential. The first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita is a description of Arjuna's dejection, after the warriors on both sides have been described. Without reading the Mahabharata, parts of the first chapter cannot be understood, or cannot be understood fully. Let's take a few examples. Even if you have not read the Mahabharata, won't translations and commentaries fill in the details? It's possible, but not certain—commentaries do tend to gloss over the first chapter.

1.1—Dhritarashtra said, 'O Sanjaya! Having gathered on the holy fields of Kurukshetra, wanting to fight, what did my sons and the sons of Pandu do?' If you have read the Mahabharata, you will know Dhritarashtra was born blind. Since he was born blind, Vedavyasa offered him divine sight so that he could witness the war. But Dhritarashtra had no desire to directly see his relatives getting slaughtered. Sanjaya was born into a family of *sutas*. *Sutas* were bards, minstrels and charioteers, and Sanjaya was also one of Dhritarashtra's advisers. With Dhritarashtra refusing, Vedavyasa offered divine sight to Sanjaya. Seated far away, Sanjaya would not only be able to see what was happening, but would also know what various people were thinking. In the Bhagavad Gita, Dhritarashtra is the one who listens and Sanjaya is the one who speaks and describes. In case you don't know, the Mahabharata also tells us that Sanjaya took part in the war. The Bhagavad Gita is a dialogue between Dhritarashtra and Sanjaya. Within that, there is a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. Sanjaya is able to describe the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna because he can not only see, but also know what other people are thinking. धर्म-क्षेत्रे कुरु-क्षेत्रे— the word used is क्षेत्र and every translator will translate this as field or region, probably the former. *Kshetra* is not only a field or region, it is also a sacred place of pilgrimage. You have no doubt come across the word तीर्थ (*tirtha*) as a place of pilgrimage. Strictly speaking, a *kshetra* is a place of pilgrimage where there is no flowing water and *tirtha* is a place of pilgrimage where there is flowing water. Kurukshetra had five lakes, created from the blood of kshatriyas when Parashurama slaughtered them, but it did not have flowing

water. Why is Kurukshetra being described as a holy field (धर्मक्षेत्र)? Such a description precedes the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas and the exposition of the Bhagavad Gita. King Kuru was a common ancestor of both the Kauravas and the Pandavas. (The Kauravas have that name because of King Kuru.) King Kuru performed extremely difficult austerities in that region, desiring that he and his subjects should be able to go to heaven. Had that boon been granted, all the rules of the world would have been disturbed. Therefore, a modified boon was granted to Kuru. Anyone who died fighting in Kurukshetra would go to heaven. When Yudhishtira went to heaven, that's the reason he saw Duryodhana and his brothers in heaven. Also do remember that there is an allegorical element in the use of the word *kshetra*. As we will see later, *kshetra* is the physical body and *kshetrajna* is the *atman*. Hence, *dharmakshetra* is the physical body in which we undertake acts of dharma.

1.2—Sanjaya said, 'At that time, on seeing the Pandava soldiers assembled in army formation, King Duryodhana went to the teacher and uttered the following words.' The teacher means Dronacharya. But Dronacharya wasn't the general of the Kaurava army. The general was Bhishma, not Dronacharya. There might have been various reasons for going to Dronacharya. Dronacharya might have been reluctant to fight—he was a brahmana, not a kshatriya. Arjuna was his favourite student. Unlike Bhishma, who was a relative, Dronacharya was almost like someone who was paid a salary (paid to teach) by the family. Therefore, his incentives might not have been that strong. What's the word used for 'teacher' in Sanskrit? It is acharya. There are different words used for teacher in Sanskrit: *shikshaka*, *upadhyaya*, *adhyapaka*, acharya, guru. These are sometimes used synonymously, but sometimes, there is also a hierarchy. For example, an acharya is inferior to a guru. Gurgaon (Gurugram) is named after Dronacharya's hermitage. So why is he being referred to as acharya here and not as guru? Should one read something into this? I don't know, but the point is that without reading the Mahabharata, I don't think you would have asked the question or appreciated the nuance, both about Duryodhana going to Dronacharya and the adjective used for Dronacharya.

1.3—'O Teacher! Look at this great army of the Pandavas, assembled in army formation by the son of Drupada, your talented student.' Just as Bhishma was the overall commander of the Kaurava army, Dhrishtadyumna was the overall commander of the Pandava army. He was Dronacharya's

student and King Drupada's son. Why did Duryodhana not mention Dhrishtadyumna by name? Instead, he chose to refer to Dhrishtadyumna as King Drupada's son. If you have read the Mahabharata, you will know that there was enmity and rivalry between Drupada and Dronacharya. Perhaps Duryodhana wished to remind Dronacharya of this enmity, so that he would get an additional urge to fight.

1.4 to 1.9—Duryodhana describes warriors on the Pandava side and then on the Kaurava side. In Udyoga Parva of the Mahabharata, just before Bhishma Parva, there is a description of warriors on the Pandava side and the Kaurava side. In Duryodhana's listing of the Pandava side, in the first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, we have Yuyudhana, Virata, Drupada, Dhrishtaketu, Chekitana, Purujit Kuntibhoja, Shaibya, Yudhamanyu, Uttamauja, Subhadra's son and the sons of Draupadi. Yuyudhana is another name for Satyaki, a warrior from the Vrishni lineage. Satyaki was therefore related to Krishna and was also Arjuna's student. Virata was the king of Matsya. His daughter, Uttara, married Arjuna's son, Abhimanyu. Drupada was the king of Panchala and his daughter was Draupadi. The Chedi kingdom was a powerful kingdom. When the Chedi king, Shishupala, was killed by Krishna, Shishupala's son became the king. This son was Dhrishtaketu and he fought on the side of the Pandavas. Chekitana was from the Vrishni lineage. Why is Chekitana mentioned immediately after Dhrishtaketu? This is probably because Chekitana was Dhrishtaketu's son. Kunti was the daughter of King Kuntibhoja and who was allied with the Pandavas. The kingdom was known as the Kuntibhoja kingdom. King Kuntibhoja's son was Purujit. Both Kuntibhoja and Purujit fought on the side of the Pandavas. In 1.5, we have an expression like पुरुजित्कुन्तिभोजश्च। How should one read this? I read it as Purujit from the Kuntibhoja kingdom. But if another translator reads this as Purujit and Kuntibhoja, that's not incorrect either. Since there was a Shaibya who fought on the side of the Kauravas, the name Shaibya can cause confusion. This Shaibya was from the kingdom of Shibi and he fought on the side of the Pandavas. Yudhamanyu and Uttamauja are often mentioned together. They were King Drupada's sons, that is, they were Draupadi's brothers. When Arjuna's chariot advanced, Yudhamanyu protected it on the left and Uttamauja protected it on the right. Subhadra's son means Abhimanyu. Through the five Pandava brothers, Draupadi had five sons. The names are not always given very consistently. But the most common listing is Prativindhya,

Sutasoma, Shrutakarma, Shatanika and Shrutasena. In Duryodhana's listing of the Kaurava side in the first chapter, we have Dronacharya, Bhishma, Karna, Kripa, Ashvatthama, Vikarna and Somadatta's son. Kripa or Kripacharya was Dronacharya's brother-in-law. His sister, Kripa, was married to Dronacharya. Ashvatthama was Dronacharya's son. Vikarna was Duryodhana's brother. Somadatta's son means Bhurishrava, from the kingdom of Bahlika. In these passages, an expression like महारथ (*maharatha*) is used. *Maharatha* means a great charioteer or great warrior, but there is a finer shade of meaning. *Ratha* is a charioteer. *Maharatha* is a great charioteer, superior to a *ratha*, and is a warrior who can take on 10,000 enemy soldiers simultaneously. An *atiratha* is greater than a *maharatha*. Karna refused to fight as long as Bhishma was the commander because Bhishma described him as half a *ratha*.

Enough of the Mahabharata, let's move on to Krishna. When we meet Krishna in the Mahabharata, he is already an adult. His other exploits are described in Hari Vamsha and the Puranas.

Was Krishna a real person? I don't think anyone asks this question today. But it was a question that was asked in the nineteenth century, particularly by Western scholars. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote a devastating rebuttal in 1886. This was called 'Krishna-Charitra' or, 'The Character of Krishna'. There is more than one translation available in English. Let's go through the arguments about Krishna's historicity, some of which were mentioned by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. This is not meant to be a scholarly book. So I will only give you a flavour of some of the arguments, not all of them. If you are interested in scholarly details, consider the book by Hemchandra Raychaudhuri.¹³

The Upanishads are ancient Sanskrit texts and there are more than 200 of these. The Chandogya Upanishad is a major Upanishad and is dated to between eighth and sixth century BCE. First, in Part III, Chapter XVII and Verse 6 of Chandogya Upanishad, there is a reference to someone named Krishna, the son of Devaki, who studied under the sage Ghora Angirasa. As all of us know, Devaki was Krishna's mother. Unless I am quoting from the Bhagavad Gita 'proper', I have no intention of burdening you unnecessarily with Sanskrit. Therefore, let me quote from Swami Nikhilananda's English translation of this particular part of Chandogya Upanishad. 'Ghora, of the line of Angirasa, communicated this teaching to Krishna, the son of Devaki and it quenched Krishna's thirst for any other knowledge.'¹⁴ It is certainly

possible that there were two different people named Krishna, both of whose mothers were named Devaki. But that would have been a remarkable coincidence.

Second, Megasthenes visited India between 302 and 288 BCE. Seleucus Nicator sent him as an ambassador to Chandragupta Maurya's court. A series known as *The Cambridge History of India* was published by Cambridge University Press between 1922 and 1937. This was in five volumes and the first volume was on ancient India. Megasthenes wrote a book called *Indika*, which has now been lost. But bits of what Megasthenes wrote have survived in the writings of authors like Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Pliny and Arrian. Since we are not in a position to read those, here is a quote from the first volume of *The Cambridge History of India*.

Heracles the Greeks seemed to themselves to discover in Krishna. It was an accidental variation that the Greek legend represented him as having been born in Thebes and the Indians claimed him as sprung from the Indian earth. 'This Heracles,' according to Megasthenes, 'was especially worshipped by the Suraseni, an Indian people (the Curasenas), where there are two great cities, Methora (Mathura, Muttra) and Clisobora (Krishnapura), and a navigable river, the Jobanes (Jumna), flows through their country.'¹⁵

Krishna's father was Vasudeva and Vasudeva's father was Shurasena. There is no need to explain Mathura and Yamuna. The Heracles in Greek might well be a phonetic equivalent of Hari Krishna. Therefore, by the time of Megasthenes, between 302 and 288 BCE, Krishna was worshipped.

Third, Panini, dated to the sixth or fifth century BCE, was a great Sanskrit grammarian who formalized Sanskrit grammar. Students still study Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*, which means eight chapters. In IV.3.98 of *Ashtadhyayi*, there is a reference to Vaasudeva (I have written Krishna as Vaasudeva, to distinguish him from his father, Vasudeva) and Arjuna together. A little before this, in IV.3.95, the word 'bhakti' is used, suggesting Vaasudeva and Arjuna were worshipped. Patanjali (second century BCE) was another great Sanskrit grammarian, who wrote a commentary on Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*. Patanjali's work is known as *Mahabhashya*. In 1874, the Sanskrit scholar and indologist, Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandarkar, wrote a paper on allusions to Krishna in Patanjali's work. Professor Bhandarkar concluded,

The stories of the death of Kamsa and the subjugation of Bali were popular and current in Patanjali's time. Krishna or Vaasudeva was mentioned in the story as having killed Kamsa. Such stories formed the subjects of dramatic representations, as Puranic stories are still popularly represented on the Hindu stage. That the event of Kamsa's death at the hands of Krishna was in

Patanjali's time believed to have occurred at a very remote time... I have thus brought together seven passages from a work written in the middle of the second century before Christ which show that the stories about Krishna and his worship as a god are not so recent as European scholars would make them.¹⁶

I mentioned the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute earlier. In 1917, this was established in the memory of Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandarkar.

Fourth, there was a Sanskrit playwright named Bhasa. He pre-dated Kalidasa and is dated third or fourth century CE. Two of Bhasa's plays have Krishna as the main character. The first of these two plays is called *Duta-Kavya*, and it is about the incident when Krishna went as a messenger to Duryodhana. The second is known as *Hari Vamsha* or *Bala-Charita* and is about incidents from Krishna's childhood.

Fifth, there are Jataka stories; stories about the past lives of the Buddha. These are dated to a period between 300 BCE and 400 CE. I am going to quote from 'Ghata Jataka', a story listed as No. 454 in standard listings of Jataka stories. The Jataka stories are in Pali, and this quote is from an English translation done by W.H.D. Rouse in 1901. Everyone is possibly familiar with incidents from Krishna's life story. Therefore, even if I quote fragments of the Rouse translation, breaking the continuity, it should still make sense.

Once upon a time, a king named Mahākāṁsa reigned in Uttarāpatha, in the Kāṁsa district, in the city of Asitañjanā. He had two sons, Kāṁsa and Upakāṁsa, and one daughter named Devagabbhā. On her birthday, the brahmins who foretold the future said of her: 'A son born of this girl will one day destroy the country and the lineage of Kāṁsa.' Devagabbhā was again with child, and that very day Nandagopā conceived also. When their time was come, they brought forth on the same day, Devagabbhā a son and Nandagopā a daughter. But Devagabbhā, in fear that her son might be put to death, sent him secretly to Nandagopā, and received Nandagopā's daughter in return... The king was alarmed. 'How can we get hold of them?' he asked his courtiers. They replied, 'Sire, they are wrestlers. Let us hold a wrestling match in the city, and when they enter the ring we will catch them and put them to death.' So they sent for two wrestlers, Cānura and Muṭṭhika, and caused proclamation to be made throughout the city by beat of drum, 'that on the seventh day there would be a wrestling match.'... They now set out, intending to conquer all of India. In a while they arrived at the city of Ayojjhā, the seat of king Kālasena. This they encompassed about, and destroyed the jungle around it, breached the wall and took the king prisoner, and took the sovereignty of the place into their hands. Thence they proceeded to Dvāravatī.

As is obvious, this is nothing but the story about Krishna.

Sixth, there are references in the Jaina (Jain) tradition, mentioning that Krishna was a contemporary of Arishtanemi or Neminatha, the twenty-second Tirthankara. Krishna is believed to have been Neminatha's cousin.

The twenty-third Tirthankara was Parshvanatha, dated between 872 BCE and 772 BCE. So, Krishna must have lived before the ninth century BCE.

Seventh, so far, I have only mentioned examples from texts. There are archaeological evidences too. Vidisha is quite close to Bhopal. Once upon a time, Emperor Ashoka used to be the governor of Vidisha. Vidisha is near the river Betwa, referred to as Vetravati in Kalidasa's works. Earlier, Vidisha used to be known as Besnagar. If you go to Vidisha, you will see a stone pillar dated between 125 BCE and 100 BCE known as the Heliodorus Column or Heliodorus Pillar. This Heliodorus was an ambassador of King Antialcidas/Antialkidas from Taxila/Takshashila. In the Brahmi inscription on the pillar, Heliodorus describes himself as Vaasudeva's devotee. If you peer up, you will be able to see Garuda at the top of the pillar. Excavations around the pillar have revealed an entire temple complex. There are other inscriptions from around Chittorgarh in Rajasthan, known as Hathibada Ghosundi inscriptions. These are Sanskrit inscriptions in the Brahmi script dated between second century BCE and first century BCE. They mention Samkarshana (Balarama's name) and Vaasudeva. Temple structures have been found around the areas where these inscriptions were found.

Eighth, other than excavations around the Mathura Vrindavana area, I should mention the excavations in Dvaraka. Here is a quote from an article the archaeologist R.S. Rao wrote in 1990. You might find his book to be more accessible.¹⁷

The available archaeological evidence from onshore and offshore excavations confirms the existence of a city-state with a couple of satellite towns in 1500 bc. That they were submerged by the sea is also proved. The Mahabharata and Puranas refer to the submergence of Dvaraka and no other city. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that the structural remains and antiquities found seaward of the area mentioned in the epic are of the city of Dvaraka of the Mahabharata Age. This discovery has turned myth into history. The date, 16th century BCE for Mahabharata War may be nearer the truth if we take into account the use of iron weapons in the Mahabharata war.

What does this add up to? It adds up to quite a bit of circumstantial evidence. In 1850, Henry David Thoreau wrote, 'Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk.' A trout in milk is indeed circumstantial evidence, but the probability is high that the milk is adulterated. I have given you a flavour of some of the evidence, and I repeat, what I have cited is not exhaustive. Though no one can produce a birth certificate for Krishna, any more than one can for Jesus Christ, the probability is pretty high that Krishna was a real person. I think the

Ockham's razor principle also suggests we accept Krishna as a real historical figure, rather than insist he was mythical.

I deliberately don't want to get into issues of dating the Kurukshetra War. Dates can vary widely, especially if you are basing your calculations on astronomy. The range is from 5561 BCE to 950 BCE. I have earlier mentioned why astronomical calculations can be messy. Sometimes, calculations can be in solar months. Sometimes, they can be in lunar months and there is a matching issue. Lunar months may start with *purnima* or *amavasya* (night of the new moon). Calculations using *rashis* (signs of the zodiac) can replace calculations using *nakshatras*. There will be precession of the equinoxes. In other words, over a period of time, methods of India's astronomical calculations also changed. Today, we have Mahabharata (F) and there is an astronomical reference in it. Was that astronomical reference part of Mahabharata (O) or was it introduced at an intervening stage? Is it clear what that astronomical reference means, or is it subject to some interpretation? That's the reason those who use astronomy to calculate a date for the Kurukshetra War never agree among themselves. All the other methods (archaeology, geological changes, changes in Sanskrit grammar, genealogical lists given in Puranas) converge to a date around 1400 BCE for the Kurukshetra War, give or take a couple of centuries either way. I hope you noticed the sixteenth-century BCE reference in the R.S. Rao quote. The Mahabharata tells us Krishna died thirty-six years after the Kurukshetra War. I should tell you that the Puranas (not the Mahabharata) tell us Krishna was eighty-nine years old when the Kurukshetra War was fought. Whatever be the dates of Krishna's birth and death, there was a gap of almost one thousand years between Krishna's life and the composition of Mahabharata (O) and the Bhagavad Gita. It is easy to miss this important fact.

With all these little bits of information I have given you, surely there shouldn't be a question about Krishna's historicity.



¹³Raychaudhuri, Hemchandra. *Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaishnava Sect.* R.N. Bhattacharya, Calcutta, 1920.

¹⁴Swami Nikhilananda. *The Upanishads, Taittiriya and Chhandogya, Vol. 4.* Harper and Brothers, New York, 1959.

¹⁵Rapson, E. J. (edited). *The Cambridge History of India, Volume 1, Ancient India.* Cambridge University Press, London, 1922, p. 408.

¹⁶Bhandarkar, R.G. 'Allusions to Krishna in Patanjali's Mahabhashya.' *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. III, 1874.

¹⁷Rao, S.R. 'Further excavations of the submerged city of Dwarka: Recent Advances in Marine Archaeology', Proceedings of the second Indian Conference on Marine Archaeology of Indian Ocean Countries. *Marine Archaeology*, National Institute of Oceanography, January 1990. The book is, *The Lost City of Dvaraka* by S.R. Rao, Aditya Prakashan, Delhi, 1999.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA SYNTHESIS

The Bhagavad Gita is a synthesis. We are often told that. What does it synthesize?

The Bhagavad Gita has eighteen chapters. The numbers within brackets indicate the number of shlokas in each chapter. The shlokas aren't evenly distributed across the chapters. The longest chapters are the second and the eighteenth.

(1) अर्जुनविषादयोगः	Arjuna's dejection (47)
(2) साङ्ख्ययोगः	Knowledge of the self (72)
(3) कर्मयोगः	Karma (43)
(4) ज्ञानकर्मसंन्यासयोगः	Knowledge, action and renunciation (42)
(5) संन्यासयोगः	Renunciation (29)
(6) ध्यानयोगः	Meditation (47)
(7) ज्ञानविज्ञानयोगः	Knowledge (30)
(8) अक्षरब्रह्मयोगः	The imperishable brahman (28)
(9) राजविद्याराजगुह्ययोगः	Royal knowledge and secrets (34)
(10) विभूतियोगः	Divine glory (42)
(11) विश्वरूपदर्शनयोगः	Vision of the universal form (55)
(12) भक्तियोगः	Devotion (20)
(13) क्षेत्रक्षेत्रज्ञविभागयोगः	The knower and the field (34)
(14) गुणत्रयविभागयोगः	The three gunas (27)
(15) पुरुषोत्तमयोगः	The supreme Purusha (20)
(16) दैवासुरसम्पद्विभागयोगः	The divine and the demonic (24)
(17) श्रद्धात्रयविभागयोगः	Three kinds of faith (28)
(18) मोक्षसंन्यासयोगः	Emancipation and renunciation (78)

As I have just stated, there are several chapters in the Bhagavad Gita. Sometimes, people only read the second chapter, or a few shlokas from the third and the fourth, and assume they have read and understood the Bhagavad Gita. (I hope you won't do that.) There is a famous *stotram* by Adi Shankaracharya known as *Bhaja Govindam*. You have no doubt heard it being sung. It begins भज गोविन्दं भज गोविन्दं गोविन्दं भज मूढमते। 'Worship Govinda! Worship Govinda! O one who is foolish in intelligence! Worship Govinda!' There is an expression there—

.भगवद्गीता किञ्चिदधीता—‘Having studied a little bit of the Bhagavad Gita’. As if, reading a few verses from the Bhagavad Gita is enough for salvation. Yes, the Bhagavad Gita should be read, but all of it, not just a verse from here and a verse from there.

The titles of the chapters of the Bhagavad Gita are naturally in Sanskrit. How these Sanskrit titles are rendered into titles of the chapters in English depends on who the translator is, though very similar words will be used.

Glancing at the titles of the chapters, one might deduce that the Bhagavad Gita first talks about karma yoga (say [Chapter 2](#)), then it talks about jnana yoga (say [Chapter 7](#)) and finally it talks about bhakti yoga (say [Chapter 12](#)). Indeed, there are people who have suggested that the first six chapters are about karma yoga, the next six chapters are about jnana yoga and the final six chapters are about bhakti yoga. C. Rajagopalachari wrote a commentary on *Bhaja Govindam*. It was called *Bhaja Govindam: A Song of Sri Sankara*.¹⁸ In that, Rajaji wrote:

The way of devotion, is not different from the way of knowledge or Jnana. When intelligence matures and lodges securely in the mind, it becomes wisdom. When wisdom is integrated with life and issues out in action, it becomes Bhakti. Knowledge, when it becomes fully mature is Bhakti. If it does not get transformed into Bhakti, such knowledge is useless tinsel. To believe that Jnana and Bhakti, knowledge and devotion are different from each other, is ignorance.

Whether you read Rajaji’s commentary on *Bhaja Govindam* or not, I hope at some point you will read Sri Aurobindo’s *Essays on the Gita*.¹⁹ Let me warn you this is heavy reading. I recommend you should read Sri Aurobindo only after you have read the Bhagavad Gita (not just a few shlokas) carefully. Sri Aurobindo wrote:

I hold it therefore of small importance to extract from the Gita its exact metaphysical connotation as it was understood by the men of the time—even if that were accurately possible. That it is not possible, is shown by the divergence of the original commentaries which have been and are still being written upon it; for they all agree in each disagreeing with all the others, each finds in the Gita its own system of metaphysics and trend of religious thought.

As an individual, you possess a heart, a mind and a body. Ideally, the three should be in balance and equilibrium. The heart is associated with bhakti, the mind is associated with jnana and the body is associated with karma. Does it make sense to say that the heart, the mind and the body are distinct?

Later, we will talk about what the Bhagavad Gita has to say. At the moment, we are only on a listing of the chapters. From the titles of the chapters, it is incorrect to presume a transition from karma to jnana and then to bhakti. We may have got used to titles of the chapters in our editions of

the Bhagavad Gita today. But these are later additions, for our convenience. The original text of the Bhagavad Gita, or the Mahabharata for that matter, had no titles for the chapters. Without titles, the text proceeded seamlessly from one chapter to the next. Do remember, this was through oral transmission. Therefore, it was necessary to remind the listener of what had happened earlier, through a little bit of repetition, a bit like a brief refresher course. This is the style adopted in the Mahabharata and the Puranas. There are traces of that in the Bhagavad Gita too. For example, [Chapter 2](#) begins by reminding us of what has happened in [Chapter 1](#). [Chapter 3](#) begins by reminding us, through Arjuna's question, of what has been said in [Chapter 2](#). [Chapter 5](#) does this again, through Arjuna's question. [Chapter 8](#) has the same style, as do Chapters 11, 12, 17 and 18. A little bit of a refresher course and seeking answers to questions still not adequately answered, or unclear.

Fine, the titles of the chapters were added later. But what about that little bit at the end of a chapter? For example, in many editions, the first chapter will end with ॐ तत्सदिति श्रीमद्भगवद्गीता सूपनिषत्सु ब्रह्मविद्यायां योगशास्त्रे श्रीकृष्णार्जुनसंवादे अर्जुनविषादयोगो नाम प्रथमोऽध्यायः. Loosely translated, 'In the glorious Bhagavad Gita, in knowledge of the brahman, in the sacred text of yoga, in the conversation between Shri Krishna and Arjuna, thus ends the first chapter titled "Arjuna's dejection".' This seems to have a title for the first chapter. Similar endings seem to have titles for the other chapters too. These are known as colophons. As I have mentioned earlier, these colophons were added later.

The titles of the chapters also have the word yoga (योगः) attached. Each chapter is such and such yoga. The word yoga has multiple meanings. In the titles, it is best to ignore the word. If you don't want to ignore it, yoga means 'bringing together'. Therefore, अर्जुनविषादयोगः simply means bringing together everything on Arjuna's dejection and so on.

Let's move on with the various elements the Bhagavad Gita synthesizes. First, there is yoga, a word I have just mentioned. There were six systems of darshana (loosely, philosophical schools of thought). These were Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta. We need not get into details of each. Nyaya was about logic and epistemology. Vaisheshika was similar, with some bits of metaphysics and ethics. Drawing on the Vedas, Mimamsa was about notions of dharma. Vedanta was about jnana and moksha. I have grossly simplified and done injustice to the schools. But I don't want to get into too much of unnecessary detail. I want to focus on

yoga. All of us have some idea about yoga, though unfortunately, we have often reduced it to a system of physical calisthenics. If we know a little bit more than that, we will know about Patanjali and the *Yoga Sutra* he compiled, around 400 CE. There are 196 *sutras* or aphorisms in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. The word *sutra* means a thread. The *sutras* are cryptic and brief. When there was no writing, and knowledge was transmitted orally, a lot of memorization was needed. This explains the cryptic and brief element, true of Panini and Patanjali and many texts. Therefore, to understand such texts, one needs a commentary. We may even know that Patanjali spoke of *ashtanga* (eight-limbed) yoga. These eight limbs of yoga are *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*. यम-नियमासन- प्राणायाम-प्रत्याहार-धारणा-ध्यान-समाधयोऽष्टावङ्गानि 'Yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana and samadhi are the eight limbs of yoga'.

The Sanskrit is from 2.29 of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* and the translation I have given you is by Swami Vivekananda. I mentioned Swami Vivekananda's monograph on Raja Yoga earlier. In this monograph, he also translated Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*.²⁰ *Yama* includes rules for self-control, like non-violence and truthfulness. *Niyama* has norms for behaviour like purity, contentment, persistence and study. What's the difference between *yama* and *niyama*? They sound very similar. *Yama* is about what you do individually. *Niyama* is about what has been collectively decided to be good behaviour. *Asana* is posture, while *pranayama* is control of the breath of life. *Pratyahara* is withdrawal from the external world, while *dharana* is concentration. *Dhyana* is meditation and *samadhi* is achieving union with the supreme. But reducing Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* to *ashtanga* yoga alone is unfair, because there is a lot more in Patanjali. However, this isn't a book about Patanjali. What we need to note is that there were many other texts on yoga too. It is not that there was only one text, with one singular view.²¹ Elements of what we normally understand as yoga will be found in the Bhagavad Gita, such as in chapters 4 and 6. But one should be careful. The Bhagavad Gita does not use the word yoga in the sense that it is used in Patanjali or in these other yoga texts. I have told you earlier that the word yoga has multiple meanings. The root has a sense of yoking, like yoking a chariot or cart. One of these meanings is union—union between the human and the divine. I said earlier that for a better appreciation of the Bhagavad Gita, one should read the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata is gigantic in size

and most people who read it focus on what's normally regarded as interesting, that is, the conflict between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. But there is much more in the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata is divided into eighteen sections, known as Parvas. The longest of these is known as Shanti Parva and talks about what happens once the Kurukshetra War is over. As a subsection of Shanti Parva, there is a section known as Moksha Dharma Parva. I think one will form a better appreciation of the Bhagavad Gita if one reads the Moksha Dharma Parva as a companion text. One will have a better understanding of what the Bhagavad Gita means by yoga.

I will now give you a few shlokas from the Bhagavad Gita, describing meditation. These shlokas are from [chapters 4](#) and [6](#) and you will see how, what I have just said about yoga, fits in. From now on, whenever I quote a shloka, I will give you the original Sanskrit. After that, I will do the पदच्छेद and अन्वय. These are not separate exercises, but are often done together. And, finally, I will give you my translation. The translation in English may occasionally seem a bit odd, because the subject is suppressed. The subject can sometimes be suppressed in Sanskrit. In addition, a sentence may cut across more than one shloka. Therefore, the subject can be in a preceding or succeeding shloka.

6.10

योगी युञ्जीत सततमात्मानं रहसि स्थितः।
एकाकी यतचित्तात्मा निराशीरपरिग्रहः॥
योगी रहसि स्थितः एकाकी यत-चित्त-आत्मा निराशीः
अपरिग्रहः सततम् आत्मानम् युञ्जीत॥

‘Seated in a secluded place, alone, controlled in mind and body, without desire, without receiving and giving, a yogi should always try to pacify his *atman*.’ This bit is not difficult to understand, is it? ‘Without receiving and giving’ means without receiving objects from anyone, or without giving objects to anyone. There may be a time and place for such receiving and giving, but not while one is engaged in meditation.

6.11

शुचौ देशे प्रतिष्ठाप्य स्थिरमासनमात्मनः।
नात्युच्छ्रितं नातिनीचं चैलाजिनकुशोत्तरम्॥
शुचौ देशे प्रतिष्ठाप्य स्थिरम् आसनम् आत्मनः।
न अति-उच्छ्रितम् न अति-नीचम् चैल-अजिन-कुश-उत्तरम्॥

‘In a pure place that is not too high and not too low, unmoving, he will place his seat, cloth and hide on *kusha* grass.’ *Kusha* is sacred grass. On a bed of *kusha* grass, the person who is meditating will first place the hide [*ajina*] of an animal and then on top of that, he will place a piece of cloth [*chaila*] for the seat. In those days, this was the yoga mat.

6.12

तत्रैकाग्रं मनः कृत्वा यतचित्तेन्द्रियक्रियः।
उपविश्यासने युञ्जयाद्योगमात्मविशुद्धये॥
तत्र एकाग्रम् मनः कृत्वा यत-चित्त-इन्द्रिय-क्रियः।
उपविश्य आसने युञ्जयात् योगम् आत्म-विशुद्धये॥

‘There, focusing the intellect, controlling the action of the mind and the senses, seated on that seat, will practice yoga to purify the *atman*.’

6.13

समं कायशिरोग्रीवं धारयन्नचलं स्थिरः।
संप्रेक्ष्य नासिकाग्रं स्वं दिशश्चानवलोकयन्॥
समम् काय-शिरः-ग्रीवम् धारयन् अचलम् स्थिरः।
सम्प्रेक्ष्य नासिक-अग्रं स्वम् दिशः च अनवलोकयन्॥

‘Still, body, head and neck erect and unmoving, gazing at the tip of one’s nose and not looking in any other direction.’ Tip of one’s nose is a literal translation. Some say that the tip or top of the nose is to be interpreted from the bottom up, so it means the middle of the eyebrows. Others say the tip means the sky ahead of the tip of the nose.

4.29

अपाने जुह्वति प्राण प्राणेऽपानं तथाऽपरे।
प्राणापानगती रुद्ध्वा प्राणायामपरायणाः॥
अपाने प्राणम् प्राणे अपानम् जुह्वति तथा अपरे।
प्राण-अपान-गती रुद्ध्वा प्राणायाम-परायणाः॥

‘Others offer the *prana* breath in the *apana* breath and the *apana* breath in the *prana* breath. They restrain the flow of the *prana* breath and *apana* breath and practice *pranayama*.’ *Prana* is a general expression for the breath of life, as well as a specific term for the act of exhalation. *Ayama* means control or restraint, so *pranayama* is control of the breath of life. *Pranayama* has three components: *puraka*, *rechaka* and *kumbhaka*. *Puraka* is when the inhaled *apana* air fills up the exhaled *prana* air and temporarily stops its exit. *Rechaka* is when the exhaled *prana* air stops the entry of the inhaled *apana* air. *Kumbhaka* is when *prana* and *apana* are both controlled and the air is restrained inside the body. Offering the *prana* breath in the *apana* breath is thus *puraka* and offering the *apana* breath in the *prana* breath is *rechaka*. Restraining the flow of the *prana* breath and the *apana* breath is *kumbhaka*.

The second element the Bhagavad Gita synthesizes is *samkhya* and again, the Moksha Dharma Parva will give us a better understanding of what the Bhagavad Gita means by *samkhya*. Do remember that [Chapter 2](#) of the Bhagavad Gita is titled साङ्ख्ययोगः. The word साङ्ख्य has multiple meanings, but broadly, this school of *darshana* is about rational determination. The sage Kapila is believed to have been the first to expound *samkhya*. But we can’t date Kapila satisfactorily. Perhaps I shouldn’t have used the word school in the singular. There were many different *samkhya* schools, with sometimes different views. Unfortunately, many early *samkhya* texts have been lost. We only have references to them. The earliest text that still exists is *Samkhyakarika*, composed between 320 and 540 CE, or a little earlier.²² In Moksha Dharma Parva, there is a conversation between King Janaka and Yajnavalkya, where the sage Yajnavalkya teaches King Janaka. Yajnavalkya says:

There is no knowledge that is equal to *samkhya*. There is no strength that is equal to yoga. They prescribe similar practices and both are said to lead to prosperity. However, men who possess limited intelligence perceive them as distinct. We see them as identical and have arrived at this

determination. Whatever is seen through yoga is exactly the same as whatever is seen through *samkhya*. A person who sees yoga and *samkhya* as identical actually sees the truth.²³

Whatever other *samkhya* schools or texts may have said, for the Bhagavad Gita, the two have been synthesized. *Samkhya* has notions of the three *gunas* (qualities) of *sattva* (purity), *rajas* (passion) and *tamas* (ignorance); and Purusha (the passive principle) and Prakriti (the active principle). In a little bit more detail, *samkhya* talks of *tattvas* (principles) involved in evolution. There are the five gross elements of earth, water, fire, air and ether/space, known as *mahabhutas*. Next come five subtle elements. These are form, sound, smell, taste and touch, known as *tanmatras*. There are the five organs of perception—eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin, known as *jnanendriyas*. Notice the matching—eyes with form, ears with sound, nose with smell, tongue with taste and skin with touch. Add the five organs of action—mouth, feet, hands, genital organs and anus, known as *karmendriyas*. If you add that up, you get twenty principles. But we can't ignore the mind (*manas*), intellect (*buddhi*) and ego (*ahamkara*). Note that *manas* is not quite mind in the Western sense. Mind in the Western sense is a bit of *manas* and a bit of *buddhi*. Therefore, we are now at twenty-three. Once we add Prakriti and Purusha, we have twenty-five. These are the twenty-five *tattvas* of *samkhya*.

Let me repeat my word of caution. Meanings of words and indeed the meaning of the word *samkhya* itself, differ between the Bhagavad Gita and *samkhya* texts. Nevertheless, you will find *samkhya* terms and notions in the Bhagavad Gita. For example, chapters 13 and 14 have a lot of those. But there are instances from outside chapters 13 and 14 too. Let me give you some examples.

10.26

अश्वत्थः सर्ववृक्षाणां देवर्षीणां च नारदः।
गन्धर्वाणां चित्ररथः सिद्धानां कपिलो मुनिः॥
सर्व-वृक्षानाम् अश्वत्थः देवर्षीणाम् च नारदः
गन्धर्वाणाम् चित्ररथः सिद्धानाम् कपिलः मुनिः॥

‘Among all trees, [I am] *ashvattha*. Among divine sages, [I am] Narada. Among *gandharvas*, [I am] Chitraratha. And among those who are *siddhas*,

[I am] the sage Kapila.’ The Lord is describing himself. I have placed the ‘I am’ within brackets because that expression doesn’t occur in this shloka. It occurs earlier and this shloka is a continuation. The *ashvattha* is the holy fig tree. *Devarshis* are divine sages. *Gandharvas* are semi-divine species who are celestial singers and musicians and Chitraratha is the king of the *gandharvas*. *Siddhas* are sages who have attained liberation. They have obtained success in pursuing this objective. For each category, the best in the category is being described and for *siddhas*, we have Kapila, the sage who propounded *samkhya*.

3.42

इन्द्रियाणि पराण्याहुरिन्द्रियेभ्यः परं मनः।
मनसस्तु परा बुद्धिर्यो बुद्धेः परतस्तु सः॥
इन्द्रियाणि पराणि आहुः इन्द्रियेभ्यः मनः परम् मनसः तु
बुद्धिः परा यः तु बुद्धेः परतः सः॥

‘It is said that the senses are superior. The mind is superior to the senses. Intellect is superior to the mind. That [the *atman*] is superior to intellect.’

13.5

महाभूतान्यहङ्कारो बुद्धिरव्यक्तमेव च।
इन्द्रियाणि दशैकं च पञ्च चेन्द्रियगोचराः।
महा-भूतानि अहङ्कारः बुद्धिः अव्यक्तम् एव च।
इन्द्रियाणि दश-एकम् च पञ्च च इन्द्रिय-गोचराः॥

‘The great elements, the ego, the intellect and the unmanifest [meaning *Prakriti*], the ten organs of sense [*jnanendriyas* and *karmendriyas*] and the single one [meaning *manas*] and the objects of the five senses [meaning the *tanmatras*]...’

14.5

सत्त्वं रजस्तम इति गुणाः प्रकृतिसंभवाः।
निबध्नन्ति महाबाहो देहे देहिनमव्ययम्॥
सत्त्वम् रजः तमः इति गुणाः प्रकृति-सम्भवाः।
निबध्नन्ति महा-बाहो देहे देहिनम् अव्ययम्॥

‘O mighty-armed one! The qualities *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, generated from Prakriti, bind the indestructible *atman* in the body.’

After yoga and *samkhya*, the third element in the Bhagavad Gita’s synthesis is Vedanta, also known as Uttara Mimamsa. Literally, Vedanta means the end of the Vedas. Therefore, it refers to texts that came after the Vedas—that is, the Upanishads. But today, asked for texts that capture the essence of Vedanta, most people will mention the Upanishads, Brahmasutra (composed by Badarayana between 400 and 450 CE) and the Bhagavad Gita, the three texts I mentioned earlier. Any commentary you read of the Bhagavad Gita will certainly have some kind of Vedanta lens. In its core, Vedanta believes the following: (1) Every living being has a soul, known as *jivatman* (जीवात्मन्). जीव + आत्मन् = जीवात्मन्। The word ‘soul’ is an imperfect translation of *atman*, but there is nothing better. (2) There is the universal soul, brahman (ब्रह्मन्) or *paramatman* (परमात्मन्). (3) Vedanta is knowledge or awareness (*jnana*, ज्ञान) about the relationship between the *jivatman* and the *paramatman*. (4) There is the cycle of worldly existence, *samsara* (संसार) and the goal is to become free of this cycle, attaining emancipation (*moksha*, मोक्ष). (5) But until one has attained emancipation, one is bound by *karman* (कर्मन्). (*Karman* is what we normally refer to as karma. Because the word has a neuter gender in Sanskrit, it is written as *karman*.) Let’s park (4) and (5) for the moment, we will come back to them later. Within that core of Vedanta, there are different schools of thought—Adi Shankaracharya’s Advaita; Ramanucharya’s (1017–1137 CE) Vishishtadvaita; Madhvacharya’s (1017–1137 CE) Dvaita; Nimbarkacharya’s (seventh century CE) Dvaitadvaita; Vallabhacharya’s (1479–1531 CE) Shuddhadvaita; Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s (1486–1534 CE) Achintyabhedabheda and many more. While reading the Bhagavad Gita, one shouldn’t get sucked into the finer differences and subtleties. Take the quality of sweetness. If I am able to appreciate that attribute in the abstract, I am ready for Advaita, non-duality between the *jivatman* and the *paramatman*. But how many people can appreciate the quality of sweetness in the abstract? If I have a glass of

sugarcane juice, I can't see the sweetness in any form, but I can taste it. That's like Vishishtadvaita, qualified non-duality. However, if I have a cube of sugar, I can see the sweetness in some form. That's like Dvaita, duality between the two, the person who sees and the attribute that is seen. I have simplified grossly and have done injustice to these different schools, but you get the general idea. Let's not get sucked into this. Instead, let me give you a couple of shlokas to illustrate the Vedanta strand in the Bhagavad Gita. Let me repeat the colophon I gave you earlier from the first chapter. There are similar colophons at the end of every chapter.

ॐ तत्सदिति श्रीमद्भगवद्गीतासूपनिषत्सु ब्रह्मविद्यायां योगशास्त्रे श्रीकृष्णार्जुनसंवादे अर्जुनविषादयोगो नाम प्रथमोऽध्यायः Loosely translated, 'In the glorious Bhagavad Gita, in knowledge of the brahman, in the sacred text of yoga, in the conversation between Shri Krishna and Arjuna, thus ends the first chapter titled "Arjuna's dejection".'

Yes, this is a loose translation. The Sanskrit doesn't only say 'In the glorious Bhagavad Gita'. It actually says, 'In the glorious Bhagavad Gita, in the Upanishad...'. The Bhagavad Gita has the status of an Upanishad. If you remember the Gitadhyana I mentioned earlier, 'All the Upanishads are like cows, Partha [Arjuna] is the calf and the learned drink the milk that is the great ambrosia of the Gita.' The Bhagavad Gita is permeated with notions of Vedanta.

12.3

ये त्वक्षरमनिर्देश्यमव्यक्तं पर्युपासते।
सर्वत्रगमचिन्त्यं च कूटस्थमचलं ध्रुवम्।
ये तु अक्षरम् अनिर्देश्यम् अव्यक्तम् पर्युपासते।
सर्वत्रगम् अचिन्त्यम् च कूटस्थम् अचलम् ध्रुवम्॥

'But those who worship the indestructible, indescribable, unmanifest, omnipresent, unthinkable, original, immovable and constant...' All of these are references to the brahman. The sentence is incomplete because it continues in the next shloka.

13.12

ज्ञेयं यत्तत्प्रवक्ष्यामि यज्ज्ञात्वाऽमृतमश्नुते।
अनादिमत्परं ब्रह्म न सत्तन्नासदुच्यते॥
यत् ज्ञेयम् यत् ज्ञात्वा अमृतम् अश्नुते तत् प्रवक्ष्यामि।
तत् अनादिमत् परम् ब्रह्म सत् न असत् न उच्यते॥

‘I will state that which is to be known. Knowing that, [one] attains immortality. That supreme brahman, without origin, is said to be neither existent, nor non-existent.’

I referred to Vedanta as Uttara Mimamsa, which means post-Mimamsa. Mimamsa was one of the six schools of *darshana* and is sometimes known as Purva Mimamsa, to distinguish it from Uttara Mimamsa or Vedanta. Though there is much more to the Mimamsa texts, they are primarily about the mantras and ritual of the Vedas, often known as *karma kanda*. In contrast, Vedanta is about *jnana kanda*. The Vedas have a concept of *yajna* (sacrifice). From stray shlokas like 2.42 and 2.43 given below, one shouldn't form the impression that the Bhagavad Gita is dismissive of the Vedas, except that the Bhagavad Gita exhorts us to rise above what are often interpreted to be objectives of the Vedas.

2.42 and 2.43

यामिमां पुष्पितां वाचं प्रवदन्त्यविपश्चितः।
वेदवादरताः पार्थ नान्यदस्तीति वादिनः॥
कामात्मानः स्वर्गपरा जन्मकर्मफलप्रदाम्।
क्रियाविशेषबहुलां भोगैश्वर्यगतिं प्रति॥
पार्थ वेद-वाद-रताः अन्यत् न अस्ति इति वादिनः
अविपश्चितः काम-आत्मानः स्वर्ग-पराः भोग-ऐश्वर्य-गतिम्
प्रति क्रिया-विशेष-बहुलाम् जन्म-कर्म-फल-प्रदाम् याम्
इमाम् पुष्पिताम् वाचम् प्रवदन्ति॥

‘O Partha! Those who are ignorant speak these flowery words, praising the Vedas and claiming there is nothing else. They are addicted to desire, think of heaven as the supreme objective and are enamoured of the fruits of birth

and action. They praise many rites and rituals that lead to pleasure and wealth.’

On the contrary, the Vedas represent the fourth strand synthesized into the Bhagavad Gita.

15.15

सर्वस्य चाहं हृदि सन्निविष्टो मत्तः स्मृतिर्ज्ञानमपोहनं च।

वेदैश्च सर्वैरहमेव वेद्यो वेदान्तकृद्वेदविदेव चाहम्॥

अहम् सर्वस्य हृदि सन्निविष्टः मत्तः स्मृतिः ज्ञानम् अपोहनम् च
अहम् च एव सर्वैः वेदैः वेद्यः अहम् एव च वेदान्त-कृत् वेद-वित् च॥

‘I am established in the hearts of all beings. I result in memory and knowledge and these being taken away. Indeed, it is I who am the knowledge of the Vedas and the origin of Vedanta. And I am the knower of the Vedas.’

18.5

यज्ञदानतपःकर्म न त्याज्यं कार्यमेव तत्।

यज्ञो दानं तपश्चैव पावनानि मनीषिणाम्॥

यज्ञ-दान-तपः-कर्म न त्याज्यम् तत् कार्यम् एव।

यज्ञः दानम् तपः च मनीषिणाम् पावनानि एव॥

‘Sacrifices, donations and austerities are not to be relinquished. Those actions certainly have to be performed. Because sacrifices, donations and austerities purify the learned.’

4.25 to 4.28

दैवमेवापरे यज्ञं योगिनः पर्युपासते।
 ब्रह्माग्नावपरे यज्ञं यज्ञेनैवोपजुह्वति॥
 श्रोत्रादीनीन्द्रियाण्यन्ये संयमाग्निषु जुह्वति।
 शब्दादीन्विषयानन्य इन्द्रियाग्निषु जुह्वति॥
 सर्वाणीन्द्रियकर्माणि प्राणकर्माणि चापरे।
 आत्मसंयमयोगाग्नौ जुह्वति ज्ञानदीपिते॥
 द्रव्ययज्ञास्तपोयज्ञा योगयज्ञास्तथापरे।
 स्वाध्यायज्ञानयज्ञाश्च यतयः संशितव्रताः॥
 अपरे योगिनः दैवम् एव यज्ञम् पर्युपासते अपरे।
 ब्रह्म-अग्नौ यज्ञेन यज्ञं एव उपजुह्वति॥
 अन्ये श्रोत्र-आदीनि इन्द्रियाणि संयम-अग्निषु जुह्वति अन्ये।
 शब्द-आदीन् विषयान् इन्द्रिय-अग्निषु जुह्वति॥
 अपरे ज्ञान-दीपिते आत्म-संयम-योग-अग्नौ सर्वाणि।
 इन्द्रिय-कर्माणि प्राण-कर्माणि च जुह्वति॥
 अपरे संशितव्रताः द्रव्य-यज्ञाः तपो-यज्ञाः योग-यज्ञाः।
 तथा च स्वाध्याय-ज्ञान-यज्ञाः यतयः॥

‘Other yogis perform yajnas to the gods. Others use the yajna as an offering to the fire that is the brahman. Others offer senses like hearing as offerings to the fire that is self-control. Others offer sounds and other objects to the fire that is the senses. Others offer all action of the senses and action of the breath of life as offerings to the fire of self-control, lit up through knowledge. Some use the yajna of offering gifts; others use the yajna of austerities. Some use the yajna of yoga and still others, firm in their resolve and careful, use the yajna of knowledge.’

In 18.5 and 4.28, you may have noticed the word *tapas* (तपस्). The word means asceticism or austerities and the word has a notion of heat and pain. It certainly doesn’t mean the appetizer you get in Spain or countries where Spanish cuisine has left an influence! *Tapasya* (तपस्या) is the act of asceticism. A male ascetic is *tapasvin* (तपस्विन्) and a female ascetic is

tapasvini (तपस्विनी). Translating *tapas* as asceticism or austerities doesn't capture the suggestion of heating and scorching, resulting in purification. In the Vedas, there is relatively more emphasis on yajna. In the Upanishads, there is relatively more emphasis on *tapas*. In 4.25 to 4.28, the Bhagavad Gita, of course, uses the word yajna in a broad sense. Indeed, in 4.33, a shloka I have not quoted, the Bhagavad Gita says that the best yajna is one that is performed with jnana, knowledge. But otherwise, there can be a quid pro quo element in yajnas. I am undertaking a sacrifice to get something back in return. I am pleasing the gods so that they bestow a boon on me. 3.10 to 3.12 of the Bhagavad Gita have that nuance.

3.10 to 3.12

सहयज्ञाः प्रजाः सृष्ट्वा पुरोवाच प्रजापतिः।
 अनेन प्रसविष्यध्वमेष वोऽस्त्विष्टकामधुक्॥
 देवान्भावयतानेन ते देवा भावयन्तु वः।
 परस्परं भावयन्तः श्रेयः परमवाप्स्यथ॥
 इष्टान्भोगान्हि वो देवा दास्यन्ते यज्ञभाविताः।
 तैर्दत्तानप्रदायैभ्यो यो भुङ्क्ते स्तेन एव सः॥
 पुरा प्रजापतिः सह-यज्ञाः प्रजाः सृष्ट्वा अनेन।
 प्रसविष्यध्वम् एषः वः इष्ट-कामधुक् अस्तु उवाच॥
 अनेन देवान् भावयत ते देवाः वः भावयन्तु।
 परस्परं भावयन्तः परम् श्रेयः अवाप्स्यथ॥
 यज्ञ-भाविताः देवाः वः इष्टान् भोगान् दास्यन्ते।
 तैः दत्तान् एभ्यः अप्रदाय यः भुङ्क्ते सः हि स्तेनः एव॥

‘Earlier, Prajapati [Brahma] created beings, accompanied by a sacrifice, and said, with this [the sacrifice], may you increase, and may this grant all the objects you desire. Through this [the sacrifice], cherish the gods and those gods will cherish you. By cherishing each other, you will obtain that which is most desired. Because, cherished by the sacrifice, the gods will give you all desired objects. He who enjoys these without giving them [the gods] their share is certainly a thief.’ Therefore, the notion of yajna does feature in the Bhagavad Gita. But there is yajna in general and there is yajna as intended by the Bhagavad Gita. As intended in the Bhagavad Gita, a yajna is a sacrifice that is done for the Supreme Lord. Everything else leads to bondage. When you read the complete Bhagavad Gita, you will not only

read shlokas 3.10 to 3.12, but also the immediately preceding 3.9, which says that. I have not specifically quoted 3.9 because those points will recur later.

A word on the expression ‘gods’—we often have a preconceived notion of god, and people might say, ‘I don’t believe in god.’ Unless one explains what one means by ‘god’, saying ‘I don’t believe in god’ is a meaningless statement. Both words—atheist and agnostic—are negative. They negate theist and gnostic. Unless theist and gnostic are defined, atheist and agnostic don’t convey any meaning. Gnostic has the same root as jnana (knowledge). What does it mean to say I am against knowledge? Hence, I have used the lower case ‘god’ for *deva*, not God with a capital letter. The Sanskrit word is देव (*deva*) for the masculine and देवी (*devi*) for the feminine, or देवत (*devata*) for the masculine and देवता (*devataa*) for the feminine. The etymological root of *deva/devi/devata/devataa* means the shining or resplendent one. That’s the reason दिवा (*diva*) means the day and the one who creates the day is दिवाकर (*divakara*), the sun. Hence, *deva/devi/devata/devataa* simply means a superior entity, superior to the human species, a point we will come back to. Often, *yajna* has a quid pro quo relationship with that superior entity. In contrast, *tapasya* is about purifying oneself. You may argue that’s not true. Isn’t *Itihasa* and the Purana replete with stories about various *asuras* performing *tapasya* and obtaining boons from gods? That’s true. However, do note all those boons are bestowed by Brahma and Shiva. You won’t normally come across incidents of Vishnu conferring a boon. Indeed, more often than not, when boons bestowed by Brahma and Shiva cause a problem, Vishnu has to step in to solve it. But let me not digress too much. In Chapter 17, the Bhagavad Gita talks about desirable forms of *tapasya*. The idea is to purify oneself. The beauty of the Bhagavad Gita is that *yajna* and *tapasya* complement each other. They merge.

17.5 and 17.6

अशास्त्रविहितं घोरं तप्यन्ते ये तपो जनाः।
दम्भाहङ्कारसंयुक्ताः कामरागबलान्विताः॥
कर्षयन्तः शरीरस्थं भूतग्राममचेतसः।
मां चौवान्तःशरीरस्थं तान्विद्ध्यासुरनिश्चयान्
अशास्त्र-विहितम् घोरम् तप्यन्ते ये तपः जनाः।
दम्भ-अहंकार-संयुक्ताः काम-राग-बल-अन्विताः॥
कर्षयन्तः शरीरस्थम् भूत-ग्रामम् अचेतसः।
माम् च एव अन्तः-शरीरस्थम् तान् विद्धि आसुर-निश्चयान्॥

‘Those who perform terrible austerities, not sanctioned by the sacred texts [*shastras*], full of insolence and ego and deriving strength from desire and attachment, devoid of consciousness, torture the elements in the body and also me, inside the body [as the *jivatman*]. Know them to be driven by *asura* resolutions.’

17.14 to 17.19

देवद्विजगुरुप्राज्ञपूजनं शौचमार्जवम्।
 ब्रह्मचर्यमहिंसा च शारीरं तप उच्यते॥
 अनुद्वेगकरं वाक्यं सत्यं प्रियहितं च यत्।
 स्वाध्यायाभ्यसनं चैव वाङ्मयं तप उच्यते॥
 मनःप्रसादः सौम्यत्वं मौनमात्मविनिग्रहः।
 भावसंशुद्धिरित्येतत्तपो मानसमुच्यते॥
 श्रद्धया परया तप्तं तपस्तत् त्रिविधं नरैः।
 अफलाकाङ्क्षिभिर्युक्तैः सात्त्विकं परिचक्षते॥
 सत्कारमानपूजार्थं तपो दम्भेन चैव यत्।
 क्रियते तदिह प्रोक्तं राजसं चलमध्रुवम्॥
 मूढग्राहेणात्मनो यत्पीडया क्रियते तपः।
 परस्योत्सादनार्थं वा तत्तामसमुदाहृतम्॥
 देव-द्विज-गुरु-प्राज्ञ-पूजनम् शौचम् आर्जवम्
 ब्रह्मचर्यम् अहिंसा च शारीरम् तपः उच्यते॥
 यत् अनुद्वेगकरम् सत्यम् प्रिय-हितम् वाक्यम् च
 स्वाध्याय-अभ्यसनम् च एव वाङ्मयम् तपः उच्यते॥
 मनः-प्रसादः सौम्यत्वम् मौनम् आत्म-विनिग्रहः
 भाव-संशुद्धिः इति एतत् मानसम् तपः उच्यते॥
 अफल-आकाङ्क्षिभिः युक्तैः नरैः परया श्रद्धया तप्तम्
 त्रिविधम् तपः तत् सात्त्विकम् परिचक्षते॥
 सत्कार-मान-पूजार्थम् दम्भेन च एव यत् तपः क्रियते
 तत् इह राजसम् चलम् अध्रुवम् प्रोक्तम्॥
 मूढ-ग्राहेण आत्मनः पीडया परस्य उत्सादनार्थम् वा
 यत् तपः क्रियते तत् तामसम् उदाहृतम्॥

‘Worship of gods, brahmanas²⁴ [*dvijas* may also mean the first three varnas], gurus and the wise, purity, uprightness, *brahmacharya* and non-violence—these are known as physical austerities. Not uttering words that lead to anxiety, speaking the truth and that which is pleasant and leads to welfare and self-study—these are known as austerities in speech. Tranquillity of mind, gentleness, silence, self-control and purity of sentiments—these are known as mental austerities. These three types of austerities, performed single-mindedly by men, without attachment to the fruits and with supreme faith, are said to be of the *sattva* type. Austerities performed with the objective of obtaining praise, respect or worship, and based on insolence, are said to be of the *rajas* type and in this world, are [the fruits are] temporary and unstable. Austerities performed on the basis of delusion, resulting in the oppression of one’s self or undertaken to destroy others, are said to be of the *tamas* type.’ I hope you now understand why I said that *tapas* [of the right type] is about purifying one’s own self.

If you recall, towards the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned six systems of *darshana*: Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta. So far, we have seen that the Bhagavad Gita synthesizes four of these (and much more). What of Nyaya and Vaisheshika? Nyaya is about logic and about types of acceptable proof to establish a proposition. Vaisheshika evolved independently, but eventually Nyaya and Vaisheshika got integrated. Given the nature of the subject, Nyaya and Vaisheshika do not figure in the Bhagavad Gita directly, but indirectly. They underpin the arguments advanced in the Bhagavad Gita. For instance, we accept something as true if we can directly perceive it. This is known as *pratyaksha*. But perceived by what? The obvious five senses, the mind, the intellect or something else? We also accept something as true if we can infer it empirically. This is known as *anumana*. There is also *shabda*, which means the testimony of others. But discussing all this will be too much of a digression.

Let me conclude this chapter by mentioning the fifth strand that goes into the Bhagavad Gita’s synthesis. Surprisingly, this is rarely mentioned. But I don’t think it is possible to appreciate the Bhagavad Gita without this strand. This is the *pancharatra* (a sacrifice performed for five nights) philosophy, incorporating elements of bhakti (faith/devotion) and Vishnu’s *avatars* (incarnations). There are several mentions of the *pancharatra* philosophy in the Mahabharata and the Puranas (for example, the Bhagavata

Purana). Bits of the *pancharatra* philosophy evolved before the Bhagavad Gita was composed, other bits drew on the Bhagavad Gita and developed those notions further. Amongst the most recognized shlokas of the Bhagavad Gita are:

4.7 and 4.8

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत।
अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदाऽऽत्मानं सृजाम्यहम्॥
परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम्।
धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय संभवामि युगे युगे॥
भारत यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिः अधर्मस्य।
अभ्युत्थानम् भवति तदा अहम् आत्मानम् सृजामि॥
साधूनाम् परित्राणाय दुष्कृताम् विनाशाय।
धर्म-संस्थापन-अर्थाय च युगे युगे सम्भवामि॥

‘O descendant of the Bharata lineage [Arjuna]! Whenever dharma goes into a decline and *adharma* is on the ascendance, then I create myself. To protect the virtuous and to destroy the evildoers and establish dharma, I manifest myself from *yuga* to *yuga*.’ This is the concept of Vishnu’s incarnations, and that of Krishna in particular. The word *avatara* means coming down, descent. The verb is अवरोहण (*avarohana*), to descend from a higher plane to a lower plane. But that isn’t the key message of the Bhagavad Gita. The Lord isn’t going to descend to save humanity and the world, not every time. The key message of the Bhagavad Gita is the reverse verb, आरोहण (*arohana*), implying that we raise ourselves from a lower plane to a higher plane. We can become *deva/devi/devata/devataa*, shining and resplendent. There are different listings of Vishnu’s incarnations. But the most common one, and I should stress that this is not the only one, is a listing of ten *avatars*: Matsya (the fish), Kurma (the tortoise), Varaha (the boar), Narasimha (half-man, half-lion), Vamana (dwarf), Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki. Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha and Vamana were in *satya yuga*. Parashurama and Rama were in *treta yuga*. Krishna was in *dvapara yuga* and Buddha was in *kali yuga*. Kalki is still in

the future. Compared to *satya yuga*, there are fewer *avatars* now. This reinforces the point I made, about the emphasis shifting from *avarohana* to *arohana*. Do you notice the obvious? This reflects evolution—fish to tortoise, tortoise to boar, boar to half-man, half-lion. Water to land, fish to amphibian, amphibian to mammal, and so on. But that evolutionary point is deeper than what is immediately obvious. Narasimha was only half a man. Vamana was a complete man, but a dwarf. Parashurama was a brahmana, but behaved like a kshatriya. Rama was a kshatriya. In the next chapter, I will point out that brahmana means an ideal human. The first brahmana *avatara* will be Kalki. We live in a very homocentric world. We have climbed up the evolutionary ladder and believe that *homo sapiens* is perfect. Notice that in most films in which aliens are depicted, or in something like *Star Trek*, the aliens are remarkably like present human beings in appearance, only slightly distorted. However, if we believe in evolution, we must also believe that human beings will evolve further and not remain the way they are now. Because of the advances made in science and technology, we have become extremely arrogant. But, as a species, we too need to evolve. The Bhagavad Gita is about that evolution, from a lower plane to a higher one.

Many people have a very cursory familiarity with the Bhagavad Gita. They indiscriminately quote only one shloka from the Bhagavad Gita. Actually, they only quote the first half of the shloka. The shloka in question is 2.47.

2.47

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि॥
ते अधिकारः कर्मणि एव कदाचन फलेषु मा।
कर्म-फल-हेतुः मा भूः ते सङ्गः अकर्मणि मा अस्तु॥

‘You have the right to action alone. You never have the right to the fruit. Do not be motivated to act because of the fruit. But don’t be motivated to not acting either.’ In other words, we often reduce our understanding of the Bhagavad Gita to an imperfect understanding of karma yoga. On the basis of that half a shloka, you have the right to action alone, and not to the fruit. Because of what I have said in this chapter, I hope you now appreciate that

the synthetic structure of the Bhagavad Gita covers an extremely extensive canvas. It is not only about karma yoga.



¹⁸Rajagopalachari, C. *Bhaja Govindam: A Song of Sri Sankara*. Moyer Bell, 2005.

¹⁹This has been published as an independent book. But the most accessible way to read it is probably as Vol. 19 of the *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, published by Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust in 1997. Available at: <https://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/Sri-Aurobindo-VOL-19-Essays-On-The-Gita.pdf>. Last accessed on 12 June 2020.

²⁰The monograph has been reprinted in Volume 1 of *Swami Vivekananda's Collected Works*. Available at: https://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_1/raja-yoga/raja-yoga_contents.htm. Last accessed on 12 June 2020.

²¹If you are interested, you can try reading, James Mallinson and Mark Singleton, *Roots of Yoga* Penguin, 2017.

²²If you are interested in samkhya, Gerald James Larson, *Classical Samkhya: An Interpretation of Its History and Meaning*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2001, is a very good introduction.

²³I translated the Mahabharata and this quote is from my translation: *The Mahabharata*. Penguin Books, July 2015.

²⁴Because of what will be said later, don't jump to the conclusion that brahmana means a brahmana in the varna sense.

THE *SMRITI* BACKGROUND

No matter how important the Bhagavad Gita is as a text, it is a *smriti* text. It is not a *shruti* text. A *shruti* text is cast in stone. It does not change from one *yuga* to another. In contrast, a *smriti* text is context-specific. It reflects the value judgements of the time and the place in which it was composed and can vary from age to age. I have already told you that the Kurukshetra War probably took place around 1400 BCE and that Krishna died thirty-six years after that. I have also told you a single author composed the Bhagavad Gita, probably around fifth century BCE. That's a gap of almost one thousand years, more if the Kurukshetra War happened earlier. Therefore, three propositions should be self-evident: (1) What Krishna said may not be the same as what was stated in the fifth century BCE text. But this is a proposition we can't do much with. (2) The Bhagavad Gita text we possess now may not be the same as the Bhagavad Gita text composed in the fifth century BCE. (3) As a *smriti* text, the Bhagavad Gita will reflect the value judgements of either 1400 BCE or fifth century BCE. But what's important is the core teaching, not these incidental and peripheral bits. Earlier, I mentioned M.R. Yardi's work. He identified a single author for the Bhagavad Gita and five different authors for the Mahabharata. I have no intention of suggesting that Yardi's work is the last word on the subject. But it does indicate how future research may unravel some issues. The five authors identified by Yardi for the Mahabharata are Vaishampayana, Suta, Sauti (Suta's son), the author of Hari Vamsha and the author who classified the Mahabharata into different parvas. Speculative though this might be, it is worth mentioning that Yardi hypothesized that Sauti composed the Bhagavad Gita, circa fifth century BCE. And he also speculated [chapters 7](#) (parts of it), [8](#), [9](#), [13](#), [14](#) and [17](#) were probably Sauti's additions, that is,

these chapters belonged to the fifth century BCE text, but not the 1400 BCE text. In contrast, [chapters 1–6, 7](#) (parts of it), [10](#), 11, 12, 16 and 18 were part of the 1400 BCE text. (He couldn't apportion Chapter 15 clearly.) I am not sure what one does with this information, especially because it is subjective. But it is worth keeping this at the back of one's mind. In any event, even 500 BCE was sufficiently distant from a war around 1400 BCE and a Krishna who lived then.

Value judgements are specific to a time and a place, to a certain social system and order. In some parts of the world, you might think you are within your rights to shoot a person who is trespassing on your property. I doubt you will feel the same way in India. We shouldn't use our social norms today to pass judgement on the norms prevalent in 1400 BCE or fifth century BCE. But if we do find such norms embedded in a text that originated in 1400 BCE or fifth century BCE, we are free to reject them and say that these parts of the Bhagavad Gita aren't perennial. However, before we condemn such Bhagavad Gita shlokas, let us be clear about what they say and understand them. When I meet people who condemn the Bhagavad Gita on this ground, and they often do so without reading the Bhagavad Gita, they typically mention वर्ण (varna) or attitudes towards women. Out of 700 shlokas, they will invariably pick three—4.13, 5.18 and 9.32. I have added 1.41 to 1.43, but those are usually not mentioned. Do remember what Yardi said about [Chapter 9](#) being a Sauti addition.

1.41 to 1.43

अधर्माभिभवात्कृष्ण प्रदुष्यन्ति कुलस्त्रियः।
 स्त्रीषु दुष्टासु वाष्ण्येय जायते वर्णसङ्करः॥
 कृष्ण अधर्म-अभिभवात् कुल-स्त्रियः प्रदुष्यन्ति।
 वाष्ण्येय स्त्रीषु दुष्टासु वर्ण-सङ्करः जायते॥
 सङ्करो नरकायैव कुलघ्नानां कुलस्य च।
 पतन्ति पितरो ह्येषां लुप्तपिण्डोदकक्रियाः॥
 सङ्करः कुल-घ्नानाम् कुलस्य च नरकाय एव
 हि एषाम् पितरः लुप्त-पिण्ड-उदक-क्रियाः पतन्ति॥
 दोषैरेतैः कुलघ्नानां वर्णसङ्कारकैः।
 उत्साद्यन्ते जातिधर्माः कुलधर्माश्च शाश्वताः॥
 कुल-घ्नानाम् एतैः वर्ण-सङ्कर-कारकैः दोषैः शाश्वताः
 जाति-धर्माः कुल-धर्माः च उत्साद्यन्ते॥

‘O Krishna! When evil arises, the women of the family become corrupted. O descendant of the Vrishnis! When the women are corrupted, hybrid varnas are born. Hybrid varnas ensure that the family line, and those who destroyed the family line, both go to hell. Because their ancestors fall and are deprived of offerings of funeral cakes and water-rites. From the sins of those who destroy the family line and from hybrid castes being generated, the eternal dharma of jatis and the dharma of the family are both destroyed.’ There is nothing particularly objectionable in this. Let me quote from the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955. Hindus still get married under this legislation. Section 3(f) of this statute states:

(i) ‘Sapinda relationship’ with reference to any person extends as far as the third generation (inclusive) in the line of ascent through the mother, and the fifth (inclusive) in the line of ascent through the father, the line being traced upwards in each case from the person concerned, who is to be counted as the first generation; (ii) two persons are said to be ‘sapinda’ of each other if one is a lineal ascendant of the other within the limits of sapinda relationship, or if they have a common lineal ascendant who is within the limits of sapinda relationship with reference to each of them.

Such a provision exists in customary practice and in codified legislation to prevent the ill-effects of endogamy. A *pinda* is the ball of rice offered to

deceased ancestors and *sapindas* are those who have a common ancestor, so that they offer *pindas* to the same common ancestor. In that sense, they are related and marriage between them is prohibited. When there is a war, men get killed. Women often have to marry those whom they would not have otherwise married. The women are ‘corrupted’ and hybrid varnas are born. There is confusion about who offers *pinda* to whom and the ancestors descend into hell. That’s all that Arjuna said. In implication, not that different from what is stated in the Hindu Marriage Act.

4.13

चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागशः।
तस्य कर्तारमपि मां विद्ध्यकर्तारमव्ययम्॥
चातुर्वर्ण्यम् मया सृष्टम् गुण-कर्म-विभागशः।
तस्य कर्तारम् अपि माम् विद्धि अकर्तारम् अव्ययम्॥

‘In accordance with *gunas* and tasks, the four varnas were created by me. But despite being the creator of these, know me to be constant and not the agent.’

5.18

विद्याविनयसंपन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि।
शुनि चैव श्वपाके च पण्डिताः समदर्शिनः॥
पण्डिताः विद्या-विनय-सम्पन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि
शुनि च श्वपाके च एव सम-दर्शिनः॥

‘The wise look equally upon a brahmana, who is learned and humble, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a *shvapaka*.’

9.32

मां हि पार्थ व्यपाश्रित्य येऽपि स्युः पापयोनयः।
स्त्रियो वैश्यास्तथा शूद्रास्तेऽपि यान्ति परां गतिम्॥
पार्थ ये अपि हि पाप-योनयः स्त्रियः वैश्याः तथा
शूद्राः स्युः ते अपि माम् व्यपाश्रित्य पराम् गतिम् यान्ति॥

‘O son of Pritha! Even those who are of evil birth, women, vaishyas and shudras, having sought refuge in me, they will certainly attain supreme liberation.’

There is a simplistic idea that India was divided into four varnas—brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaishyas and shudras, and we have come to call them the four castes. As if using a word (caste) with a Portuguese origin (*casta*) somehow improves understanding. The root sense of varna is in any case complexion or colour. That apart, if India was rigidly divided into four varnas, why did Arjuna (who speaks the verses 1.41 to 1.43) mention the dharma of jatis? Jati has the sense of being born into. Which is caste, varna or jati? Assuming there were four tight castes, certain tasks were recommended for each of the four varnas. 18.41 to 18.44 indicate this partly.

18.41 to 18.44

ब्राह्मणक्षत्रियविशां शूद्राणां च परंतप।
कर्माणि प्रविभक्तानि स्वभावप्रभवैर्गुणैः॥
परन्तप ब्राह्मण-क्षत्रिय-विशाम् शूद्राणाम् च।

कर्माणि स्वभाव-प्रभवैः गुणैः प्रविभक्तानि॥
 शमो दमस्तपः शौचं क्षान्तिरार्जवमेव च।
 ज्ञानं विज्ञानमास्तिक्यं ब्रह्मकर्म स्वभावजम्॥
 शमः दमः तपः शौचम् क्षान्तिः आर्जवम् ज्ञानम्।
 विज्ञानम् आस्तिक्यम् एव च स्वभावजम् ब्रह्म-कर्म॥
 शौर्यं तेजो धृतिर्दाक्ष्यं युद्धे चाप्यपलायनम्।
 दानमीश्वरभावश्च क्षात्रं कर्म स्वभावजम्॥
 शौर्यम् तेजः धृतिः दाक्ष्यम् युद्धे अपि च अपलायनम्।
 दानम् ईश्वर-भावः च स्वभावजम् क्षात्रम् कर्म॥
 कृषिगौरक्ष्यवाणिज्यं वैश्यकर्म स्वभावजम्।
 परिचर्यात्मकं कर्म शूद्रस्यापि स्वभावजम्॥
 कृषि-गौरक्ष्य-वाणिज्यम् स्वभावजम् वैश्य-कर्म
 अपि शूद्रस्य परिचर्या-आत्मकम् कर्म स्वभावजम्॥

‘O scorcher of enemies! The tasks of brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaishyas and also shudras are separately segregated in accordance with qualities that result from their natures. Control over the mind, control over the senses, austerities, purity, forgiveness, uprightness, knowledge, self-realization and indeed faith are the natural tasks for brahmanas. Valour, bravery, fortitude, dexterity, not fleeing from battle, generosity and capacity to rule are the natural tasks for kshatriyas. Agriculture, protection of cattle and trade are the natural tasks for vaishyas. Servitude is a natural task for shudras.’

Moving beyond the Bhagavad Gita, there were six occupations recommended for brahmanas: teaching, studying, performing yajnas, officiating at yajnas, donating gifts and receiving gifts. You will find these listed in the Mahabharata, the Puranas and a text like Manu Samhita (dated between second century BCE and third century CE). Kshatriyas could also perform yajnas, donate gifts, receive gifts and study. But they weren’t allowed to teach or officiate at sacrifices. Instead, they fought, punished the wicked and protected the virtuous. Vaishyas could also perform yajnas, donate gifts, receive gifts and study. In addition, they engaged in

agriculture, animal husbandry and trade. As for shudras, they served the first three varnas. Did people eat fish? Were brahmanas allowed to eat fish? The Manu Samhita tells us brahmanas were allowed to eat a type of fish known as *rohita*. This is a carp, familiar by the name of *rohu*. Who caught the fish? Fishing wasn't one of the accepted occupations listed for brahmanas, kshatriya, vaishyas or shudras. Someone must have caught the fish. If you recall the Mahabharata accounts, Satyawati, King Shantanu's wife, was the daughter of a king of fishermen. *Dhivara* means fisherman and a *dhivara* is not a brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya or shudra. When I listed out other Gitas, I mentioned the Dharma Vyadha Gita, part of the Mahabharata. A *vyadha* is a hunter and is not a brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya or shudra. You have heard about Ekalavya, Nala from the Nala and Damayanti story, and Guha who was King Dasharatha's friend in the Ramayana. Ekalavya, Nala and Guha were *nishadas*. *Nishadas* are not brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaishyas or shudras. Dharmashastra texts (like Manu Samhita) mention several other varnas, other than these four. Therefore, it is patently obvious that this simplistic assertion of society being stratified according to four varnas is not true. Every society is stratified, though we may find stratification according to class to be more acceptable. Why do we find stratification according to class to be more acceptable than stratification according to caste? Probably because we think stratification according to class is less likely to be hereditary. But it isn't as if class stratification isn't hereditary. Otherwise, we wouldn't have talked about dynasts in politics, films, business and other spheres of life, even sports. Such hereditary transmission can indeed be inequitable. Was varna hereditary? When varna became hereditary, inequities and oppression were indeed caused in the name of varna. But there is no evidence that varna was always hereditary. Indeed, if you read 4.13, it is merely a statement that different individuals have different functional and occupational specializations, depending on their *gunas*. This is true of all societies. Some people are thought leaders and intellectuals. Others rule. Still others are in agriculture, business and trade. And some, whether we like it or not, simply serve, stand and wait. From the Mahabharata, I can give examples of people 'born' into one varna who practised the avowed profession of another varna. But this is not meant to be a discussion of varna in Hinduism. There can be a legitimate critique of a hereditary varna system. However, 4.13

doesn't suggest anything hereditary. Therefore, the Bhagavad Gita should be spared that condemnation.

4.13 doesn't use the word brahmana, but 5.18 does. As I mentioned towards the end of [Chapter 5](#), a brahmana is an ideal human being. I will use the word purohita for a priest. Every purohita is not necessarily a brahmana, not in the sense the Mahabharata uses the word 'brahmana'. Are you familiar with the story of Satyakama, the son of Jabala? That story is mentioned in the Chandogya Upanishad. Satyakama went to the sage Gautama. He wanted to study under Gautama. Gautama asked him about his parentage. 'I don't know who my father is,' replied Satyakama. 'My mother is Jabala and she has been with many men. I don't know who my father is.' Gautama replied, 'You are a true brahmana, since you speak the truth,' and accepted him as a student. In that way, every acharya (teacher) is not necessarily a true brahmana. There are many today who pride themselves on being brahmanas by birth and assume that the supremacy accorded to brahmanas in a text like Manu Samhita or Bhagavad Gita, automatically applies to them. My understanding of Manu Samhita is that you don't become a brahmana simply by birth. To become a true brahmana, you need to follow the codes of conduct laid down for brahmanas, such as in 4.4 of Manu Samhita. This is what it says. A brahmana can earn a livelihood through ऋत, मृत, अमृत, प्रमृत and even सत्यनृत, but never through श्वृत्ति. Doesn't help us too much, unless we know what these different methods of subsistence mean. Of course, these words have general meanings. However, shloka 4.5 of Manu Samhita tells us what these exactly mean in the given context. *Rita* (ऋत) is *unchhavritti*. When grain is threshed, fragments are left. If you collect this leftover grain and subsist on this, this is *unchhavritti*. *Mrita* (मृत) means subsistence on food that is obtained through begging. *Amrita* (अमृत) means subsistence on food that is obtained, even though one does not ask for it. It is food that is freely given to brahmanas. *Pramrita* (प्रमृत) is food obtained through agriculture, the actual act of tilling. *Satyanrita* (सत्यनृत) is subsistence based on trade. (Notice that these are being recommended for brahmanas, not vaishyas, again driving home the point that one should be careful with straitjacketed silos.) Finally, *shvavritti* (श्वृत्ति) is the conduct of dogs. Shloka 4.5 of Manu Samhita tells us what this means in the given context. In the given context, *shvavritti* means servitude or service. A brahmana must never resort to this. Interpreted according to those strict norms laid down by Manu Samhita,

there are few brahmanas who will fit the bill now. Hence, in the Bhagavad Gita, take the word brahmana in that ideal brahmana sense, not brahmana by birth.

Nevertheless, a lingering question remains about 5.18. Isn't a shudra being equated with animals, even with a dog? Where does 5.18 use the word shudra? If anyone has translated it as shudra, that person has made a mistake. I left it as *shvapaka* (श्वपाक). The word *shva* (श्व) means dog. Just as *shvavritti* means the conduct of dogs, *shvapaka* means a person who cooks dogs and thus, eats them. Many people will find this an abhorrent idea, but there are people who do actually eat dogs. What is unnatural about dog-eaters being mentioned in the same breath as dogs? To me, this seems to be natural. Let's not bring in shudras on the basis of imperfect translations.

However, there is still 9.32.

'Even those who are of evil birth, women, vaishyas and shudras, having sought refuge in me, they will certainly attain supreme liberation.' That's the translation I gave you and I think it is the natural one. But do note, an alternative and perfectly legitimate translation is also possible, splicing the 'evil birth' bit as an adjective for the 'women' bit. For instance, I mentioned Yardi's book earlier. His translation is: 'Even those who are lowborn women, Vaisyas and Sudras, having taken refuge in Me, O Partha, reach the highest goal.' 9.32 and 9.33 need to be read together.

9.33

किं पुनर्ब्राह्मणाः पुण्या भक्ता राजर्षयस्तथा।
अनित्यमसुखं लोकमिमं प्राप्य भजस्व माम्॥
किम् पुनः पुण्याः भक्ताः ब्राह्मणाः तथा राजर्षयः
अनित्यम् असुखम् इमम् लोकम् प्राप्य माम् भजस्व॥

'What need be said about pure brahmanas and devoted royal sages? This earth is temporary and leads to unhappiness. Therefore, having obtained it, worship me.' The expression 'royal sages' is being used as a synonym for kshatriya. Hence, brahmanas and kshatriyas are being set apart (9.33), distinct from vaishyas and shudras (9.32). There is no doubt that a lot of oppression was done in the name of varna and that shudras and women

specifically suffered. But we are not discussing social norms or other texts. Our discussion is limited to the Bhagavad Gita. People often cite 9.32 to argue the Bhagavad Gita is anti-shudra. Shudras were not entitled to read the Vedas and so on. Perhaps, but do note 9.32 also mentions vaishyas in conjunction with shudras, and vaishyas were allowed to read the Vedas. 9.32 isn't quite that simple. What about women? Over a period of a thousand years, social norms change. When layers to a text are added over a period of one thousand years, and different social norms creep into a text, there will inevitably be contradictions and inconsistencies. For example, over a period of one thousand years, layers were added to the Mahabharata. Therefore, one can cite chapter and verse from the Mahabharata to demonstrate that women were much more liberated, in many ways, than they are today. Chapter and verse can be cited from the Mahabharata to also illustrate that women were oppressed and made to suffer. That's neither here, nor there. The phenomenon of women not being allowed to take part in rites is regarded as a form of inequity. But it is also possible to argue that women weren't required to take part in purificatory rites because menstruation was regarded a natural monthly process of purification. Recently, Nithin Sridhar has written an extremely interesting book on precisely this.²⁵ Reducing discussions on the Bhagavad Gita to shlokas like 9.32 does justice neither to the Bhagavad Gita, nor to us, especially if [Chapter 9](#) was a Sauti addition.

All *smṛiti* notions reflect value judgements. They are society-and history-specific. Once upon a time, all of us lived in small communities. We knew each other individually and behaved well towards each other. But as human civilization expanded, our networks expanded. We started to interact with people we didn't individually know. Therefore, communities needed to evolve some norms of civilized behaviour. You will be surprised at how few people you know reasonably well, in terms of close social relationships. I don't mean acquaintances, those whose contacts are stored in your mobile phone. I mean those who are really close. After an anthropologist named Robin Dunbar, this is known as the Dunbar's number and is roughly around 150, with a range between 100 and 250. Most people cannot handle a number more than this. With 150 people, you don't need norms. You will automatically behave in a civilized fashion, as you will towards your relatives. However, many interactions are with relatively more anonymous people, beyond that immediate circle of 150. (When interactions are

anonymous, such as on social media, people tend to be much more uncivilized.) Therefore, communities and societies evolved norms for dealing with such anonymous behaviour. Sometimes, these were introduced by kings to protect the virtuous and punish the wicked. In more modern societies, they are done by legislatures through legislation and define 'crime'. Notice that notions of 'crime' are very society-specific. In India, notions of 'crime' are largely defined by the Indian Penal Code (IPC), though there are definitions of 'crime' outside the IPC too. The point is that notions of 'crime' may differ between a country like India and a country like the United States of America (the US). For instance, suppose in the middle of the night you suddenly detect an intruder in your house. In India, if you possessed a gun and shot that intruder, it would be a crime. In some states in the US, it would be perfectly legal. All of these attitudes and value judgements are about good behaviour, *sadachara* (सदाचार). *Sadachara* is not the same as dharma. *Sadachara* is context-specific and transient. Dharma is perennial, irrespective of societies and the historical stage in their evolution. The Bhagavad Gita's message is universal and perennial. It is not constrained by society-specific *sadachara*, nor by some society and context-specific value judgements that crept into it. You may say that I am contradicting myself. Earlier, didn't I cite shlokas to demonstrate good behaviour, as prescribed by the Bhagavad Gita? Of course, I did. But those are all from an individual's perspective. They are not good behaviour because society has decreed those norms.

'Veda, Smriti, sadacharah, Atmanstushtireva cha, Etachchaturvidhah prahus—Sakshaddharmasya Lakshanam. The definition of Religion is four-fold; Veda, Smriti, Sadacharah (good conduct) and Atmatashti (self-satisfaction).' This was what Dr B.R. Ambedkar said, speaking on the Hindu Code Bill.²⁶ He also said, 'The point is whether we are competent to make any changes, the whole history of Hindu society shows that it is continually progressing from stage to stage. Otherwise how do you explain the numerous *smritis*, one *smriti* laying down one thing and another *smriti* another? How do you explain this? Society is continuously progressing and something has got to be found which is appropriate to the *Sadachara* or *Vyavahara Dharma*.' We have the expression सदाचार = सत् + आचार, meaning, good conduct or virtuous behaviour. Who decides what is good and virtuous? Indeed, it is the individual alone who should be the touchstone, the आत्मतुष्टि aspect. But societies don't want people to be

individuals. We have an infinite capacity to straitjacket and compartmentalize them, reducing them to collective categories.

I can also invoke the four *yugas* or eras. In *satya yuga* or *krita yuga*, everyone was naturally virtuous. You didn't need special rules to ensure good conduct. However, as one progressed down the ladder, from *treta* to *dvapara* and thence to *kali yuga*, people became prone to evil. You needed a template for *sadachara* and once that got codified, it became a *smriti* text. This is a bit like a transition from a common law to civil law jurisdiction. Subsequently, to enforce rule of law, we needed a king. Hence, Prithu, after whom *prithivi* or *prithvi* (earth) is named, was the first king. Before that, with natural proclivity towards virtue, no kings were needed. (Pehowa in Kurukshetra district is named after Prithu.) Today, we have legislatures to enact laws and define crime. The point is that *sadachara* and *smriti* texts as well as the Indian Penal Code—these are all context- and society-specific. There is nothing absolute in the good or the bad prescribed through a template.

As an example, take the injunction—speak the truth. The national motto is embossed on currency notes and states सत्यमेव जयते, truth alone triumphs. The quote comes from the Mundaka Upanishad. The Mundaka is a relatively short Upanishad with sixty-four mantras. The word *mundaka* has a rare usage as 'section', in the sense of the lopped off section of the trunk of a tree. This Upanishad is so named because it has three such *mundakas* or sections. However, this isn't truth in the sense of telling a lie or not uttering a falsehood. The complete shloka states:

सत्यमेव जयते नानृतं सत्येन पन्था विततो देवयानः।
येनाक्रमन्त्यृषयो ह्याप्तकामा यत्र तत् सत्यस्य परमं निधानम्॥

'Truth alone triumphs, not falsehood. It is through truth that the path of the gods is laid out. It is by following this that the sages obtained their wishes and reached the supreme foundation of truth.' As subsequent shlokas make even clearer, this is 'truth' in the sense of achieving self-realization, not the mundane business of lying or not lying. The Mahabharata has a story about a sage named Kaushika who had taken a vow of always speaking the truth. Once, he was meditating in the forest. Along came some travellers, hotly pursued by bandits. There was a fork in the path, precisely at the spot where he was seated, meditating. The travellers requested Kaushika not to tell the

bandits which branch they had taken. Having taken a vow of speaking only the truth, Kaushika would do no such thing. He told the bandits the truth. The bandits fell upon the travellers and killed them. Consequently, Kaushika was punished by being sent to hell. There are other instances in the Mahabharata where lying served a greater common good.

सत्यं ब्रूयात्प्रियं ब्रूयान्न ब्रूयात्सत्यमप्रियम्।
प्रियं च नानृतं ब्रूयादेष धर्मः सनातनः॥

This shloka is often quoted, though people invariably quote only the first half of the shloka. The shloka is from the Manu Samhita, the first and the most important of the dharmashastra texts, a text that is often abused and maligned by people who have not even read it. There are 2,685 shlokas (spread over twelve chapters) in Manu Samhita and these are in the form of instructions given by Manu and Bhrigu (believed to be Manu's son) to sages, when the law of the Vedas had been destroyed in a flood. Manu Samhita and the dharmashastras have been interpreted as 'law' and the rigidity of that law has been castigated. On reading the Manu Samhita, I have never quite got the feeling that this was meant to be a rigid and inflexible 'law', something that had been codified and was, therefore, inviolate. Instead, I get the sense of advice being offered to the sages, something looser. Nor do I get the feeling that Manu Samhita was always normative or prescriptive in the sense of recommending what should be done; as opposed to being descriptive, describing extant practices before the flood. In any event, do keep in mind that other dharmashastra texts state Manu Samhita was meant for *satya yuga* and not other *yugas*. And the Manu Samhita itself states that several practices are for brahmanas, not others. The translation of the shloka quoted above is the following: 'Let him speak the truth. Let him speak what is pleasant. Let him not speak a truth that is unpleasant.' Does that mean one should lie, if the truth is unpleasant? Sometimes, people who translate or read only the first line of the shloka think that is what has been said. Not quite. Read the second line: 'Let him not utter an unpleasant falsehood. This is eternal dharma.' In other words, there is no injunction to lie. This shloka is from Manu Samhita, 4.138, the 138th shloka in the fourth chapter. This may be a principle that everyone should follow. However, this fourth chapter is on codes of conduct for brahmanas, not for everyone.

An obvious example of society-driven good behaviour are norms about what one should wear and what one should eat. The Bhagavad Gita has nothing to say about what you should wear. There are exactly three shlokas about what you should eat.

17.8 to 17.10

आयुःसत्त्वबलारोग्यसुखप्रीतिविवर्धनाः।
रस्याः स्निग्धाः स्थिरा हृद्या आहाराः सात्त्विकप्रियाः॥
कट्वम्ललवणात्युष्णतीक्ष्णरूक्षविदाहिनः।
आहारा राजसस्येष्टा दुःखशोकामयप्रदाः॥
यातयामं गतरसं पूति पर्युषितं च यत्।
उच्छिष्टमपि चामेध्यं भोजनं तामसप्रियम्॥
आयुः-सत्त्व-बल-आरोग्य-सुख-प्रीति-विवर्धनाः
रस्याः स्निग्धाः स्थिराः हृद्याः आहाराः सात्त्विक-प्रियाः।
कट्वम्ल-लवण-अति-उष्ण-तीक्ष्ण-रूक्ष-विदाहिनः
दुःख-शोक-आमय-प्रदाः आहाराः राजसस्य इह्याः।
यत् यातयामम् गत-रसम् पूति पर्युषितम् च
उच्छिष्टम् अपि च अमेध्यम् भोजनम् तामस-प्रियम्।

‘The *sattva*-type favour food that increases life expectancy, vitality, strength, freedom from disease, happiness and joy—those that are tasty, oily, nourishing and pleasant. The *rajas*-type favour food that is extremely bitter, acidic, salty, hot, pungent, dry and burning—those that increases unhappiness, sorrow and disease. The *tamas*-type favour food cooked a long time ago, no longer succulent and with a bad smell, stale and tasted by others—that which is impure.’

Our texts mention six kinds of taste or flavour (*rasa*): sweet (*madhura*), salty (*lavana*), pungent (*katu*), bitter (*tikta*), sour (*amla*) and astringent (*kashaya*). All our texts suggest balance, restraint and the avoidance of excesses. As far as the Bhagavad Gita is concerned, it says that about food and nothing more. Of course, it also says that you shouldn’t eat stale food,

or food that is leftover, because part of it has been eaten by others earlier. We can have a separate discussion on what other texts say on food habits. However, we are not discussing other texts, we are discussing the Bhagavad Gita. It certainly does not suggest that you should be a vegetarian, or that you should only eat certain kinds of meat. Food habits depend on history and on agro-climatic zones and geography. Take history first. Before the advent of agriculture, at best around 10,000 years ago, you ate what you got. The luxury of only eating certain kinds of food prescribed in vegetarian diets did not exist. We possess that choice now, after the development of agriculture and animal husbandry. As babies, all of us happily digest milk. As we become older, some of us retain that trait, because of a genetic mutation. As an adult, the inability to digest milk is natural. The ability to digest it is the genetic mutation. We exhibit what is known as lactase persistence and therefore, even as adults, we are tolerant towards milk and dairy products. But there are large parts of the world where people are lactose intolerant, as adults. Within India, studies have shown that towards the south and along the coast, people are lactose intolerant. Often, milk and other dairy products are part and parcel of prescribed vegetarian diets. However, genetically, some people can't digest them. The broad point is that the Bhagavad Gita's message is eternal. It is not constrained by either history or geography. It is not relevant only for India or Bharatavarsha or certain parts of it. Food habits are not even *sadachara*. But, as I said, I don't want to get into what other texts have said. However, the Bhagavad Gita is embedded in the Mahabharata. I have also said that you need to read the Mahabharata to understand the Bhagavad Gita better. I will give you two stories from the Mahabharata to think about.

The first story is about the rishi (sage) Vishvamitra. In the Mahabharata, there is a longish section known as Shanti Parva, when Bhishma is lying down on his bed of arrows and instructing Yudhishtira. Within that, there is a sub-section about *apad* dharma, the dharma in the time of calamities. I will tell you the story briefly.

In the intervening period between *treta yuga* and *dvapara yuga*, there was a terrible drought that lasted for twelve years. There was famine and no food was available. Everyone was hungry. Vishvamitra was hungry too. He couldn't feed himself. He couldn't feed his wife and children. Yes, rishis did marry and have children. In the texts, two different words are used for sages, rishis and munis. As I have told you earlier, the word muni is

etymologically linked to silence. Munis maintained silence. I haven't come across any instances of munis marrying and having children. But rishis did. To return to the story, Vishvamitra wandered around in search of food and came upon a village of *shvapakas*. Earlier, I have told you who *shvapakas* were. They weren't quite chandalas, though the two terms are sometimes used synonymously. *Shvapakas* kept dogs and also ate dogs. Vishvamitra arrived at the house of one particular chandala named Matanga. He saw dog-meat hanging from a rope in the chandala's house. Matanga had killed a dog and had eaten the flesh from the fore-quarters. The remaining carcass, with meat from the hind-quarters, was hanging from the rope. Vishvamitra waited for everyone to go to sleep, intending to steal this food for survival. When everyone was asleep, Vishvamitra gently entered the courtyard. But the noise woke up Matanga. 'Who are you?' he asked. The rishi explained who he was and that he intended to take the dog-meat away. Learning that this was the famous rishi, Vishvamitra, Matanga immediately bowed down. Vishvamitra had the reputation of being an ill-tempered sage, prone to curse at the slightest trigger. A conversation ensued between Vishvamitra and Matanga and I am only going to give you the gist of it. You should read the Mahabharata for the entire story. Matanga said, 'You should not violate dharma. You should not eat meat. A dog is a polluted creature. If you eat meat, you should not eat dog-meat. Brahmanas and kshatriyas should only eat the five different kinds of animals that have five claws.²⁷ The thighs and the haunches are the worst part of the body. If you eat dog-meat, you should not eat flesh from the hind-quarters. If you wish to eat dog-meat from the hind-quarters, it should not be meat that you have stolen. If you are going to eat meat that has been stolen, you should not steal that meat from a chandala. If I give you this, I will also commit a sin.' Obviously, Matanga did not say all this at one go. It was a conversation, and he progressively kept adding arguments. Vishvamitra replied, 'My first priority is to remain alive. One can follow dharma only if one remains alive. I know dharma better than you do. I know that the body and the *atman* are distinct. The body is eating the meat, not the *atman*. Therefore, the *atman* will not be polluted and will commit no sin.' Like Matanga, Vishvamitra did not say all this at one go. As the conversation proceeded, he progressively kept adding counter-arguments. When the final point about distinction between the body and the *atman* was made, Matanga allowed Vishvamitra to take the carcass away.

When listing various Gitas, I mentioned Dharma Vyadha Gita. This story is about another sage named Kaushika. This may or may not be the Kaushika who told the truth. We aren't told clearly. It may not have been the same one. Kaushika is more like the name of an entire family, not a proper name in the sense we understand it today. Therefore, there were several sages named Kaushika. You will find Dharma Vyadha Gita and the associated story in the section of the Mahabharata known as Vana Parva, also sometimes known as Aranyaka Parva. The story was told by the sage Markandeya to the Pandavas, when they were in exile. You should not only read the story, but the entire Dharma Vyadha Gita. I will give you the bare skeletal gist.

There was a sage named Kaushika who lived in the forest. Because of his austerities, he obtained great powers. Once, when Kaushika was seated under a tree and was chanting the Vedas, a female crane, perched on the tree, shat on his head. Kaushika became angry. When he glared at the crane in rage, it fell down on the ground, reduced to ashes. Such was the power of Kaushika's austerities. Later, Kaushika went to a village to beg for alms. Sages survived on the basis of what they had obtained through begging. Kaushika went to a certain household and asked for alms. The lady of the household asked him to wait, while she went inside to fetch the required alms. Meanwhile, the lady's husband returned and the lady chose to tend to him first. Because he had been made to wait, Kaushika became angry. He said, 'You have insulted me. Don't you know what an angry brahmana can do?' The lady replied, 'I have not insulted you. I know that brahmanas can cause havoc when they are angry. But my dharma is to first serve my husband. Since I have pursued my dharma diligently, I also possess powers. Through those powers, I know that you have burnt down a crane in your rage. A true brahmana is one who does not harm, even when he has been harmed. A true brahmana is one who has conquered his rage. What can I possibly tell a learned person like you? However, I think you have not understood dharma. There is a hunter (*vyadha*) in Mithila. If you want to know about dharma, go to him.' Prompted by the lady, Kaushika went to Mithila and sought out the hunter. He found the hunter seated in a slaughterhouse, selling the meat of deers and buffaloes. The hunter welcomed him. 'What can I possibly do for you? I know the devoted wife asked you to come to Mithila. Therefore, I do know why you have come.' Because the hunter diligently pursued his own dharma, the resultant powers had vested

him with this knowledge. Since the hunter knew what Kaushika wanted, he took him home. After all, a slaughter-house wasn't the best place to have a conversation. There is a lot in Dharma Vyadha Gita. It is a wonderful exposition of dharma. However, I have brought it in because we were discussing food habits. Therefore, let me quote what the hunter said on food and violence.

The hunter said, 'When destiny has already killed something, the killer is only the instrument. We are only instruments of our karma. When animals are killed and their meat is sold, it is only their dharma that they should be killed and eaten. According to the *shruti* texts, herbs and plants, creepers, animals, deer and birds are the decreed food for all beings.' He added that earlier, in King Rantideva's great kitchen, two thousand animals were slaughtered every day.²⁸ Rantideva gave food with meat every day. 'It has been said in the *shruti* texts that fire desires meat. A brahmana always kills animals at sacrifices. They are purified through mantras and we have heard that they go to heaven. If the fire had not desired meat earlier, who would have eaten it now? Even now, sages have articulated rules on the eating of meat.²⁹ If one follows those rules, this is as good as not eating meat.' The hunter went on, raising questions about agriculture and non-violence, as it is often understood. 'Agriculture is known to be a virtuous occupation. But it has been said that there is great violence in this. Ploughing kills many beings that lie inside the ground and many other hundreds of beings. *Vrihi*³⁰ and other kinds of rice are all living organisms. Man hunts, kills and eats animals. He also cuts trees and collects herbs. There are many living beings in trees and fruits. There are many in the water too. Everything is full of life and living beings. Fish eat fish. Beings live on other beings. Through the mere act of walking, men trample with their feet many beings that are on the ground. Even wise and learned ones kill many beings when they are seated or asleep. The entire earth and sky is full of living beings. One causes injury to them unknowingly. People have spoken about non-violence. But in this world, who does not injure living beings? There is no one who does not cause violence. There are many things in the world that are seen to be contrary. Is this dharma or is this *adharma*?'

I hope these two stories about Vishvamitra and Kaushika have given you something to think about, not only about food habits, but about dharma

in general. The Bhagavad Gita does not exist as a text in isolation, it is set against this broader context.



²⁵Sridhar, Nithin. *The Sabrimala Confusion—Menstruation Across Cultures: A Historical Perspective*. Vitasta Publishing, 2018.

²⁶Available at: https://archive.org/stream/Ambedkar_CompleteWorks/64B4.On%20the%20Hindu%20Code%20Bill_djvu.txt. Last accessed on 12 June 2020.

²⁷These were hedgehogs, porcupines, lizards, rabbits and turtles.

²⁸It is believed that the Chambal River (earlier known as Charmanvati) emerged from the blood that flowed as a result of King Rantideva's sacrifice. Charmanvati means something that is full of hides.

²⁹Meat must be eaten after it has been offered at a sacrifice.

³⁰A kind of rice that ripens in the rainy season.

6

WHO AM I?

Recently, I was about to check into a hotel. I visited this particular city frequently and have stayed at this hotel several times. Naturally, I was pleased when the lady at the reception counter recognized me. She said, ‘Welcome back, Mr Debroy.’ She held out the required form and I signed it. ‘Can I have some ID, please?’ she asked. ‘Why do you need ID? You know me,’ I responded. Naturally, I produced the required identification. It is necessary under the law. For many purposes, my identity has been reduced to a bunch of plastic cards—Aadhaar, PAN card, passport, driving licence, an identity card issued by the Election Commission of India, credit cards and so on. Without these bits of identification, I am nothing. If I lose these, or someone steals them in a case of identity theft, I don’t know who I am. There is a famous Mullah Nasruddin story. A wealthy person invited everyone to a dinner reception. Since Mullah Nasruddin didn’t have time to change, he turned up in his torn clothes. He was treated shabbily and no one gave him food. Therefore, he went home and changed. When he turned up, attired in his fine coat, everyone welcomed him and gave him the best of food. Mullah Nasruddin started to feed his coat, ‘Eat, fur coat! Eat.’ When people asked him about his strange behaviour, Nasruddin responded, ‘I wasn’t welcome at the feast, but my coat was. So I am giving the food to my coat.’ Surely, there was more to Mullah Nasruddin than that coat, and I am more than this bunch of plastic cards.

I cannot, and should not, define myself in terms of external objects and their possession. Relations, however close, are external too. I cannot, and should not, define myself in terms of them.

1.26 to 1.27

तत्रापश्यत्स्थितान्पार्थः पितृन्थ पितामहान्।
 आचार्यान्मातुलान्भ्रातृन्पुत्रान्पौत्रान्सखींस्तथा॥
 श्वशुरान्सुहृदश्चैव सेनयोरुभयोरपि।
 तान्समीक्ष्य स कौन्तेयः सर्वान्बन्धूनवस्थितान्॥
 तत्र अपश्यत् स्थितान् पार्थः पितृन् अथ पितामहान्।
 आचार्यान् मातुलान् भ्रातृन् पुत्रान् पौत्रान् सखीन् तथा॥
 श्वशुरान् सुहृदः च एव सेनयोः उभयोः अपि।
 तान् समीक्ष्य सः कौन्तेयः सर्वान् बन्धून् अवस्थितान्॥

‘There, Partha saw fathers and grandfathers, teachers and maternal uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons and friends, fathers-in-law and well-wishers in the two assembled armies. Seeing them, all the friends and relatives assembled there, the son of Kunti...’

1.32 to 1.34

न काङ्क्षे विजयं कृष्ण न च राज्यं सुखानि च।
 किं नो राज्येन गोविन्द किं भोगैर्जीवितेन वा॥
 येषामर्थे काङ्क्षितं नो राज्यं भोगाः सुखानि च।
 त इमेऽवस्थिता युद्धे प्राणांस्त्यक्त्वा धनानि च॥
 आचार्याः पितरः पुत्रास्तथैव च पितामहाः।
 मातुलाः श्वशुराः पौत्राः श्यालाः सम्बन्धिनस्तथा॥
 कृष्ण विजयम् न राज्यम् च सुखानि च न काङ्क्षे।

गोविन्द नः राज्येन किम् भोगैः जीवितेन वा किम्॥
येषाम् अर्थे नः राज्यम् काङ्क्षितम् भोगाः सुखानि च
ते इमे आचार्याः पितरः पुत्राः तथा एव च पितामहाः
मातुलाः श्वशुराः पौत्राः श्यालाः तथा सम्बन्धिनः प्राणान्
धनानि च त्यक्त्वा युद्धे अवस्थिताः॥

‘O Krishna! I don’t want victory. Nor do I want the kingdom or happiness. O Govinda! What will we do with the kingdom, or with pleasures, or with life itself? Those for whose sake we want the kingdom and the pleasures and the happiness, they are gathered here in war, ready to give up their lives and their riches. Teachers, fathers, sons and grandfathers, maternal uncles, fathers-in-law, grandsons, brothers-in-law and other relatives.’

These shlokas, 1.26 to 1.27 and 1.32 to 1.34, are spoken by Arjuna and provide the setting for the entire Bhagavad Gita, reflecting Arjuna’s anguish. Think about how we define ourselves, moving away from plastic cards. I am so and so’s father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, grandfather, grandmother, grandson, granddaughter and so on. I mentioned Adi Shankaracharya’s *Bhaja Govindam* earlier. I said that it was composed by Adi Shankaracharya. It is more accurate to say that the composition is attributed to Adi Shankaracharya. The *stotram* usually goes by the name of भज गोविन्दम् (worship Govinda). But it also goes by the name of मोह मुद्गर (*moha mudgara*, or a club used to shatter illusion). There is a reason why I used the word ‘attributed’. You will find different renderings/texts of *Bhaja Govindam*. Usually, there will be twenty-six shlokas, but sometimes there may be an additional five shlokas, bringing the total to thirty-one. The twenty-six shlokas are divided into two groups of 12 + 14. The first set of twelve is referred to as द्वादश पञ्जरिका (*dvadasha panjarika*). *Dvadasha* means twelve and *panjarika* is a cage. You may also find references to this as *dvadasha manjarika*, with *manjarika* meaning a flower, especially of the *tulasi* plant. The second set of fourteen is referred to as चर्पट पञ्जरिका (*charpata panjarika*). *Charpata* means rags. The sense is that we are clothing ourselves in valueless and tattered rags, we are binding ourselves inside a cage. The story is that Adi Shankaracharya didn’t compose the fourteen verses of *charpata panjarika* himself. This *stotram* has a verse that is often quoted.

का ते कान्ता कस्ते पुत्रः संसारोऽयमतीव विचित्रः।
कस्य त्वं कः कुत आयातस्तत्त्वं चिन्तय तदिह भ्रातः॥

‘Who is your wife? Who is your son? This *samsara* is extremely strange. Who do you belong to? Who are you? Where have you come from? O brother! Think about the truth of this matter.’ As we progress through life, all of us are familiar with the phenomenon of friends and acquaintances with whom we become close, and then gradually drift apart. You meet a friend after many years, one with whom you were very close in school or college. Meeting after many years, that person is like a stranger. There is nothing much to talk about. You wonder if you were really close to this person. There is a simile used in the Mahabharata. In the great ocean, as they are floating along, two pieces of wood come together. Having come together, they stay together for a short while and drift apart again. In this world, the association of living beings is just like that. And this is true of friendship. As the clichéd saying goes, you can choose your friends, but not your family. There is that famous quote from Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. ‘Atticus says you can choose your friends but you sho’ can’t choose your family, an’ they’re still kin to you no matter whether you acknowledge ’em or not, and it makes you look right silly when you don’t.’ Blood may be thicker than water, but genetic research shows that regardless of blood lines, we share little that is genetically common with our blood relatives. We may have much more in common with those who are unrelated to us by blood.

Relatives are regarded as special, because we are tied to them through blood or through marriage. The expression ‘kith and kin’ is rarely used now. Kith means friends, kin means relatives. We can shake off our kith, but not our kin. If you think about it, even if we are reluctant to admit it, there is a substantial element of quid pro quo in both kith and kin. In *Bhaja Govindam*, Adi Shankaracharya stated it very strongly:

यावद्वित्तोपार्जनसक्त स्तावन्नजपरिवारो रक्तः।
पश्चाज्जीवति जर्जरदेहे वार्ता कोऽपि न पृच्छति गेहे॥

‘As long as man is capable of earning wealth, his family members are attached to him. But later, when his body has aged, even if he remains alive,

no one at home asks about his welfare.’

यावत्पवनो निवसति देहे तावत्पृच्छति कुशलं गेहे।
गतवति वायौ देहापाये भार्या बिभ्यति तस्मिन्काये॥

‘As long as there is a breath of life in the body, those at home ask about his welfare. However, when the breath of life leaves the body, even his wife is terrified of his body [dead body].’ This may sound very strong, but there is no denying it has a grain of truth. Should I define myself in terms of family relationships? That may require information in assorted documents. But it cannot answer the question—who am I?

It is easy to argue that such sentiments are easy for a *sannyasi*, an ascetic and a mendicant who has given up family and household and has nothing to do with worldly affairs. However, the word *sannyasi* doesn’t necessarily mean an ascetic and a mendicant. Any person who has placed himself (न्यास, *nyasa*) on the path of virtue and truth (सत्, *sat*) is a *sannyasi*. A template of virtuous behaviour exists for the householder too, just as it does for the ascetic and mendicant. In that template, should one differentiate between a relative and a friend? Should one differentiate between a relative or friend and a completely anonymous person? For the moment, we are on the question of defining ‘I’. Who am I? In searching for a meaning to life, we focus on what we are seeking. However, before we pin down the sought, we need to pin down the seeker. When the two are linked, differences blur. In defining ‘I’, there is the clichéd image of slicing away layers of an onion. One layer of that onion is an attempt to define ourselves with respect to our relatives, more rarely with respect to our friends.

Consider the father and mother. The words पितृ (*pitri*) and मातृ (*matri*), or their variants in vernacular languages, are the most common words for father and mother, respectively. However, the etymology of both words is based on nurturing and nourishing and has nothing necessarily to do with biological paternity and maternity. Two shlokas follow. I need not give a word-for-word translation. Since they find an echo in many texts, I need not cite chapter and verse either. The first shloka mentions five kinds of fathers (पितृ -s), the second seven. The consolidated list is: (1) Someone who gives you food; (2) Someone who saves you from fear; (3) Someone whose daughter you marry; (4) Someone who gives birth to you; (5) Someone who

invests you with the sacred thread; (6) Someone who gives you knowledge; (7) Someone who confers a mantra on you; and (8) An elder brother. जनक/जननी (*janaka/janani*) are words for biological father/mother and they are only some types of father/mother. Ditto for something like पुत्र (*putra*) or son. A son is known as *putra* because he saves his father from the hell named *put*. Having said that, a *putra* doesn't have to be biological. The dharmashastra texts mention other kinds of *putras* too. Sure, there are issues that centred on the inheritance of property. But even then, all non-biological *putras* aren't barred.

अन्नदाता भयत्राता यस्य कन्या विवाहिता।
जनिता चोपनेता च पञ्चैते पितरः स्मृताः॥
कन्यादातान्नदाता च ज्ञानदाताभयप्रदः।
जन्मदो मन्त्रदो ज्येष्ठभ्राता च पितरः स्मृतः॥

The epics and the Puranas often describe the glory of royal lineages. In talking about a specific king, having described his glorious ancestry, they will go on to say, स्वेन कार्येण (through his own deeds) or तेन कार्येण (through his deeds). I am what I am because of who I am. That definition, whatever else it may be a function of, is not a function of my friends and relatives. I have already told you about Satyakama's story from Chandogya Upanishad. There is a famous Hindi film dialogue that goes, '*Baap ka naam ka sahara kamzor log lete hain*'. (Only an incapable person invokes the father's name.) That's one layer of the onion we need to peel off. We won't find an answer to the question of 'who am I' through kith and kin. Nor should I define myself in terms of ownership of possessions—'I am the owner of such and such a car.' Or, 'I am the owner of such and such a house.' Nor should the definition be in terms of what I wear, as in the Mullah Nasruddin story. Typically, if I am in the working age group, I define myself through where I work and what my designation is. I promptly produce a visiting card. That visiting card is an answer to the question, 'What do I do?' 'Who am I?' is a different question. There are two distinct words that are often used—अहम् or 'I' and मम or 'mine'. If I want to understand and pin down the अहम्, let us first cut out the मम।

All of us are physically vain, to a greater or lesser degree. Forget the mirrors at home. We come across mirrors in public toilets and sometimes in

elevators. Confronted with a mirror, rare is the person who will not look at the mirror, to see how he/she looks. Perhaps even do a little bit of preening. There is a reference to a mirror in the Bhagavad Gita too. The universe is covered by desire. Knowledge is covered by desire. Knowledge is covered by ignorance. All these interpretations fit.

3.38

धूमेनाव्रियते वह्निर्यथाऽऽदर्शो मलेन च।
यथोल्बेनावृतो गर्भस्तथा तेनेदमावृतम्॥
यथा धूमेन वह्निः यथा च मलेन आदर्शः आव्रियते
उल्बेन गर्भः आवृतः तथा तेन इदम् आवृतम्॥

‘Like smoke covers the fire, like dust covers the mirror, like the membrane covers the embryo, in that way, this is covered by that.’ What is covered by what? This shloka alone doesn’t tell us. Taken in conjunction with preceding and succeeding shlokas, a little bit of interpretation is necessary.

3.39 and 3.40

आवृतं ज्ञानमेतेन ज्ञानिनो नित्यवैरिणा।
कामरूपेण कौन्तेय दुष्पूरेणानलेन च॥
इन्द्रियाणि मनो बुद्धिरस्याधिष्ठानमुच्यते।
एतैर्विमोहयत्येष ज्ञानमावृत्य देहिनम्॥
कौन्तेय नित्यवैरिणा एतेन दुष्पूरेण कामरूपेण
च अनलेन ज्ञानिनः ज्ञानम् आवृतम्॥
इन्द्रियाणि मनः बुद्धिः अस्य अधिष्ठानम् उच्यते।
एषः एतैः ज्ञानम् आवृत्य देहिनम् विमोहयति॥

‘O son of Kunti! This is the eternal enemy of the learned. In the form of desire, which is like an insatiable fire, it covers jnana. The senses, the mind and the intellect are said to be its [desire’s] seat. It [desire] uses these [the senses] to confound those with bodies and cover jnana.’ But I had the

mirror in mind. When we look at ourselves in the mirror, the mirror is covered in dust. When we look at the mirror to unravel the real 'I', we need to wipe away the dust and peel away several layers. The Bhagavad Gita teaches us how to do that.

5.13

सर्वकर्माणि मनसा संन्यस्यास्ते सुखं वशी।
नवद्वारे पुरे देही नैव कुर्वन्न कारयन्॥
वशी देही सर्व-कर्माणि मनसा संन्यस्य नव-द्वारे पुरे
न एव कुर्वन् कारयन् सुखम् आस्ते॥

'Using the mind to give up all action, the *atman* of a self-controlled person happily resides in the body, the city with the nine gates. He doesn't do anything. Nor does he cause anything to be done.'

Parts of this will become clearer later. But notice the body being described as a city with nine gates. The nine gates are the two eyes, the two ears, the two nostrils, the mouth, the anus and the genital organs. These are the *jnanendriyas* and *karmendriyas*, more specifically, those organs of perception and action that have passages leading into the body and leading out of the body. All too often, we define ourselves in terms of the body. Most of us take good care of the physical body. Apart from attire and ornaments, we purchase beauty care products and indulge in beauty care treatments. We are conscious of our workout schedules and wear gadgets on our hands to ensure we have done the requisite 10,000 steps every day. People are increasingly health-conscious, seeking to keep their body mass index (BMI) to between 18.5 and 25. On WHO website, it says, adults aged between eighteen and sixty-four must engage in 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity in a week, or 75 minutes of vigorously intense physical activity. Depending on which category you are in, that's 10 to 20 minutes per day. We will join camps to get toxins removed from our bodies. There is obesity and there are toxins in the mind too and surely, the mind is no less important than the body. Towards the beginning of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, it is stated: योगः चित्तवृत्ति निरोधः। One needs to be careful about how one translates the word *chitta*. Because of this, in his monograph on *Raja Yoga*, even someone like Swami Vivekananda

translated it in a somewhat awkward way: ‘*Yoga* is restraining the mind-stuff (*citta*) from taking various forms (*vruttis*).’ However, we get the general idea of controlling and restraining the mind. How many of us spend that 10 to 20 minutes per day on this? We will mechanically accept what has been called the 10,000-hour rule for many spheres of human activity, though as stated, it is often an over-simplification. Stated simply, to become an expert, you need to expend 10,000 hours. Spread over a 10-year period; that’s 1,000 hours per year, 2.7 hours per day, much more than the 10 to 20 minutes. At best, we will do 5 minutes of *pranayama* per day and expect instant noodles kind of results. Beyond a certain age, we have regular medical check-ups and worry when our BMI crosses acceptable thresholds. We are conscious of excess body weight and avoid junk food. However, as I mentioned earlier, beyond the body, we have the mind (*manas*), the intellect (*buddhi*) and ego (*ahamkara*). We need to remove clutter from these too. They also need to have acceptable BMI (if that’s the expression to use) levels.

The way to do this is through meditation (*dhyana*). Every culture and religion in the world has some emphasis on meditation. [Chapter 6](#) of the Bhagavad Gita is titled ध्यानयोगः, meaning meditation. I have already quoted shlokas 6.10 to 6.13 from [Chapter 6](#). But do recognize that other chapters, and other shlokas from [Chapter 6](#) also emphasize meditation.

5.27 and 5.28

स्पर्शान्कृत्वा बहिर्बाह्यांश्चक्षुश्चैवान्तरे भ्रुवोः।
 प्राणापानौ समौ कृत्वा नासाभ्यन्तरचारिणौ॥
 यतेन्द्रियमनोबुद्धिर्मुनिर्मोक्षपरायणः।
 विगतेच्छाभयक्रोधो यः सदा मुक्त एव सः॥
 स्पर्शान् कृत्वा बहिः बाह्यान् चक्षुः च एव अन्तरे भ्रुवोः।
 प्राण-अपानौ समौ कृत्वा नास-अभ्यन्तर-चारिणौ॥
 यत-इन्द्रिय-मनः बुद्धिः मुनिः मोक्ष-परायणः।
 विगत-इच्छा-भय-क्रोधः यः सदा मुक्तः एव सः॥

‘Banishing the touch of external objects, focusing the eyes between the eyebrows, controlling the *prana* and *apana* breath equally within the nostrils, controlling the senses, the mind and the intellect, beyond desire, fear and anger, the muni who desires moksha is always liberated.’

6.26

यतो यतो निश्चरति मनश्चञ्चलमस्थिरम्।
ततस्ततो नियम्यैतदात्मन्येव वशं नयेत्॥
यतः यतः निश्चरति मनः चञ्चलम् अस्थिरम्।
ततः ततः नियम्य एतत् आत्मनि एव वशं नयेत्॥

‘Towards whatever the fickle and restless mind wanders, withdrawing it from that, bring it under the control of the *atman*.’

6.34 and 6.35

चञ्चलं हि मनः कृष्ण प्रमाथि बलवद्दृढम्।
तस्याहं निग्रहं मन्ये वायोरिव सुदुष्करम्॥
कृष्ण मनः बलवत् दृढम् चञ्चलम् प्रमाथि
अहम् हि तस्य निग्रहम् वायोः इव सुदुष्करम् मन्ये॥

श्रीभगवानुवाच

असंशयं महाबाहो मनो दुर्निग्रहं चलं।
अभ्यासेन तु कौन्तेय वैराग्येण च गृह्यते॥
महाबाहो मनः असंशयम् चलम् दुर्निग्रहम्।
कौन्तेय तु अभ्यासेन वैराग्येण च गृह्यते॥

‘O Krishna! The mind is restless, impetuous, strong and firm. Therefore, I think that restraining it is as difficult as restraining the wind.’ Obviously, this is Arjuna speaking. The illustrious Bhagavan replied, ‘O mighty-armed one! There is no doubt that the mind is fickle and difficult to control. O son

of Kunti! However, through practice and non-attachment, it can be restrained.’

There are a couple of words in these shlokas, *moksha* and *atman*, which we can ignore for the moment. We will come back to them later. Notice that I have not translated the word *muni* liberately. A *muni* is a sage, a hermit, an ascetic. Have you come across the word *मौन* (*mouna*)? It means silence. *Muni* and *mouna* have the same etymological root. In many places around the country, I have come across *mouni babas*, or stories about them. They don’t speak. They take a vow of silence. We are *homo sapiens*, wise humans. How did we become wise? Many factors went into our becoming wise—use of tools, knowledge of fire and so on. However, evolution of language had a major role to play in our advancement. Knowledge and information could be passed on from one individual to another and from one generation to another. The store of knowledge accumulated. Think of the ancient libraries in the world, more than two thousand years ago. The Royal Library of Alexandria had an estimated 400,000 manuscripts. We don’t have an exact figure for the library in Nalanda, but there were hundreds and thousands of manuscripts. Is it possible to have too much of language? Think of our daily lives. We are busy talking and communicating. We reach for our mobile phones even in our sleep. There are high decibel levels and silence is silenced. Particularly in cities, there are sounds everywhere and we don’t hear and feel the silence of nature, even at night. Silence gives us the opportunity to contemplate and introspect. A critical component of *dhyana* is silence and solitude. If you go back and read the translation of 6.10 given in [Chapter 5](#), it too talks about solitude. Why do hermits and ascetics avoid human contact? Why does one hear of ascetics resorting to high altitudes, such as the Himalayas? To practice *dhyana*, we don’t have to go off to the Himalayas. In fact, *pranayama* is difficult at high altitudes. For ordinary people, it is best to practice *dhyana* and *pranayama* where we live. Yes, the mind is fickle and difficult to control. But as we have been told in 6.35, everything comes with practice. This isn’t instant coffee or instant noodles. A mantra may help. By the way, the word ‘mantra’ means something that controls the mind (*manas*).

Often, we accept something as fact only if it is validated by the West. This is what the US government agency, National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NIH) has to say on meditation:

Some research suggests that practicing meditation may reduce blood pressure, symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome, anxiety and depression, and insomnia. Evidence about its effectiveness for pain and as a smoking-cessation treatment is uncertain... There are many types of meditation, but most have four elements in common: a quiet location with as few distractions as possible; a specific, comfortable posture (sitting, lying down, walking, or in other positions); a focus of attention (a specially chosen word or set of words, an object, or the sensations of the breath); and an open attitude (letting distractions come and go naturally without judging them).³¹

In areas of neurology, clinical psychology and psychiatry, there has been research that establishes correlation, sometimes strong, sometimes weak. Meditation is not only good for your soul, it is also good for your body. The body isn't delinked from the rest of you. Otherwise, we wouldn't have a word like psychosomatic. It is sometimes presumed religion is based on faith, while science is based on empiricism. Empiricism means testing it out, on the basis of experiments. Hinduism is actually a very empirical religion. No one tells you, not even the rishis, that this is the truth. You will remember what I said about Nyaya and Vaisheshika. Among different methods of proof, we have *shabda* (the testimony of others), *anumana* (inference) and *pratyaksha* (direct experience). Quoting studies, such as those undertaken by NIH, or others, is *shabda*. I have met people who have been to meditation camps and returned with a glow on them. I have met a lady who shuttles back and forth between Puducherry and Ladakh (she goes to a village near Leh) every week. 'How does it work?' I asked. 'When we went to Leh, it took us 24 hours to get acclimatized.' 'It doesn't affect me,' she replied. 'Perhaps because I have been practising meditation for many years, my metabolism is different. My natural heart rate is forty beats per minute.' Forty? That's what athletes sometimes have. For the average person, it will be somewhere between seventy and ninety. Do remember, after controlling for other variables, there is some statistical correlation between the resting heart rate and life expectancy. If your heart beat is low, you will probably live longer. Naturally, this is probabilistic, not deterministic. It is an average. It may not be true for every individual. *Anumana* suggests, meditation is good for you.

However, there is *pratyaksha* too. A lot of us, including those with gadgets in their hands, aspire for 10,000 steps a day and end up doing 5,000. Let's say you take one second per step. So 5,000 steps require 5,000 seconds. 5,000 seconds is just about 83 minutes. That may be too long a window to carve out. Let's take away one entire hour from 83 minutes for browsing the

Internet and social media interactions. Even if one does 23 minutes of *dhyana* a day, one will feel the difference. That is empiricism and *pratyaksha*. That's what the Bhagavad Gita, particularly [Chapter 6](#), expounds. Try it out and feel the difference yourself. You will become a different individual, not overnight, but gradually. I have read a clutch of books on Bhagavad Gita for managers, Bhagavad Gita lessons for leaders, Bhagavad Gita for corporate success, Bhagavad Gita for success in examinations and others with sundry similar titles. I must confess that I am extremely sceptical about all these. All of these are about how you can use the Bhagavad Gita to improve your relationships with the external world and about how you can manage the external world. The Bhagavad Gita's message is not this. One would need to have a very bloated sense of ego to presume that one could change the external world and others. All of us are insignificant. What we can change is our own selves. That is what the Bhagavad Gita is about.



³¹ Available at: <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/meditation/overview.htm>. Last accessed on 9 June 2020.

WHAT AM I NOT?

Who am I? There is a question that is the obverse. Who am I not?

We love binaries. The devil is dark and black. The antithesis of the devil is pure and white. ‘When the stars threw down their spears, and water’d heaven with their tears.’ This is a quote from William Blake’s poem ‘The Tyger’, now usually written as ‘The Tiger.’ The symbolism of Blake’s poetry is not easy to understand. Let’s not forget he was a painter too. These lines are a reference to the revolt (against God) by the rebel angels, also described in John Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’. The leader of the rebel angels, when defeated and cast out from heaven, was Satan. What was Satan’s name before he revolted? The first line of George Meredith’s poem ‘Lucifer in Starlight’ reads, ‘On a starred night Prince Lucifer uprose.’ If you are going to read the Bible in English, it is good to remember that the English version has been translated from the Hebrew. The meaning of the relevant Hebrew word is the ‘shining one, light-bearer’. Older translations of the Bible (like The King James Version) render this as Lucifer. Modern translations opt for ‘morning star’ instead. Thus, before falling down from heaven, Satan was the shining one. Indeed, iconography depicts all angels to be shining. There is a famous 1805 painting by William Blake, with the long title, ‘Satan in his Original Glory: “Thou wast Perfect till Iniquity was Found in Thee”.’ This shows a shining and resplendent Satan.

I constantly meet people who proudly proclaim, ‘I am an agnostic.’ Or, ‘I am an atheist.’ People have a right to their beliefs. But I wish they would explain what they mean. In both words, ‘a’ is a negative. Therefore, you cannot tell me you are agnostic until you explain the gnostic you are negating. You cannot tell me you are atheist until you explain the theist you are negating. The word agnostic is derived from Greek: a + gnosis. Gnosis

means knowledge. Gnosis is cognate with the word ज्ञान (jnana), also meaning knowledge. Agnostic will be अज्ञान, ignorant. Is an agnostic saying she/he wishes to remain ignorant? (a) I don't know. (b) I don't want to know. (c) I don't believe it can be known. Agnostic fits all three. I can empathize with (a), but certainly not with (b) or (c). Take (a). That's typically based on lack of 'proof', a point I touched upon earlier. We will consider the question of proof later. But if I base myself on an empirical argument, how can I confidently assert (c)? Any empirical and proof-based argument can only disprove a proposition. No proposition can ever be proved. If that reminds you of Karl Popper and his test, it should. For India, in the 2011 Census, there is a category called 'religion not stated'. Almost 2.9 million people don't mention their religion. However, there is also a category called 'atheist' and this is what the numbers tell us: 33,304 people are atheists, 17,597 males and 15,707 females; 22,828 atheists are in rural India and 10,476 in urban India. Most atheists are in Maharashtra, followed by Meghalaya. I wish one knew whether they belong to the (a), (b) or (c) category.

Each expression has a history and an antecedent. When Thomas Huxley (the first person to coin the word in 1869) or Bertrand Russell used the term agnostic, they had something very specific in mind and did not bandy around the term in a loose sense.

Quotes will help. This is a quote by Huxley from an essay written in 1893:

When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist or an idealist; Christian or a freethinker; I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until, at last, I came to the conclusion that I had neither art nor part with any of these denominations, except the last. The one thing in which most of these good people were agreed was the one thing in which I differed from them. They were quite sure they had attained a certain 'gnosis'—had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble...So I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of 'agnostic'. It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the 'gnostic' of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant.³²

A quote by Bertrand Russell from an essay written in 1953, in the form of a dialogue with Socrates:

An agnostic thinks it impossible to know the truth in matters such as God and the future life with which Christianity and other religions are concerned. Or, if not impossible, at least impossible at the present time. Are Agnostics Atheists? No. An atheist, like a Christian, holds

that we can know whether or not there is a God. The Christian holds that we can know there is a God; the atheist, that we can know there is not. The Agnostic suspends judgment, saying that there are not sufficient grounds either for affirmation or for denial.³³

I can give similar quotes from Richard Dawkins.

Three obvious points follow. First, though Bertrand Russell also mentions ‘other religions’, these are reactions to Christianity and the religion defined as Christianity. Second, agnostic and atheist are sometimes treated as synonymous and sometimes regarded as distinct. Agnostic will be (a) and atheist will be closer to (c). An agnostic will say, ‘I don’t know if there is a God [however defined]’. An atheist will say, ‘I know there is no God [according to his/her definition]’. What is the word for atheist in Sanskrit and many other Indian languages? You are likely to say नास्तिक (*nastika*) and indeed, the word has been used in that sense. But *nastika* means non-believer. अस्ति means ‘is’ or ‘exists’. आस्तिक (*astika*) means someone who believes in that existence and *nastika* is its negation. The word *nastika* was used for someone who denied the rituals and supremacy of the Vedas. The right word for atheist (in the sense of non-existence of God) is निरीश्वरवादिन् (*nirishvaravadin*), an expression that is rarely used. *Nastika* can mean a non-believer in rituals and the Vedas, a non-believer in the *atman*, or a non-believer in a god who is a creator. We can’t tar everything with the same brush. People may mention Charvaka to you. Not a single one of the Charvaka texts (authored by the school, not only by the individual Charvaka) exists. They may mention the eighth or ninth century CE *Tattvopaplavasimha* by Jayarasi Bhatta as a later Charvaka school text. If you read it, you will find that Jayarasi Bhatta didn’t quite believe in what Charvaka is supposed to have believed in. They may also mention the fourteenth century CE *Sarvadarshanasamgraha* (सर्वदर्शनसंग्रह) by Madhavacharya as yet another Charvaka school text. This text states what Charvaka is supposed to have believed in, but certainly doesn’t agree with Charvaka. People may mention Ajivikas to you. Yet again, not a single Ajivika text exists. Equated with Charvaka or treated distinct from Charvaka, people may mention the Lokayata school to you. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya’s book is the best one I know of on Lokayata philosophy.³⁴ The upshot of this digression into Indian philosophy is the following: When one is told there was a healthy atheist tradition (Charvaka, Ajivikas, Lokayata) in India, one must be careful. Atheist in the sense of not believing in rituals and the Vedas? Certainly. There are shlokas against

rituals in the Bhagavad Gita too. Atheist in the sense of not believing in a creator God? Certainly. Atheist in the sense of not believing in the *atman*? We are on very shaky ground here.

If you remember, I said that *deva/devi/devata/devataa* means the shining or resplendent one. Hence, *devas* are just superior entities, superior to humans. I also said that the objective of human existence is *arohana*, to raise ourselves from a lower plane to a higher plane. There are no binaries, no black and white. Each of us has shades of black and white. Chapter 16 of the Bhagavad Gita is titled दैवासुरसम्पद्विभागयोगः meaning divine and the demonic. असुर (*asura*) is the antithesis of *deva* and means demon. असुर = अ + सुर, someone who is not a सुर (*sura*), and *sura* is a synonym for *deva*. Each one of us has *sura* traits and each one of us has *asura* traits. Rare is the person who is completely *sura* or completely *asura*. The Bhagavad Gita teaches us to control our *asura* traits and enhance our *sura* traits. This way we become more and more like *suras*. What are these traits?

16.1 to 16.4

श्रीभगवानुवाच

अभयं सत्त्वसंशुद्धिः ज्ञानयोगव्यवस्थितिः।
दानं दमश्च यज्ञश्च स्वाध्यायस्तप आर्जवम्॥
अहिंसा सत्यमक्रोधस्त्यागः शान्तिरपैशुनम्।

दया भूतेष्वलोलुप्त्वं मार्दवं ह्रीरचापलम्॥
 तेजः क्षमा धृतिः शौचमद्रोहो नातिमानिता।
 भवन्ति सम्पदं दैवीमभिजातस्य भारत॥
 दम्भो दर्पोऽभिमानश्च क्रोधः पारुष्यमेव च।
 अभयम् सत्त्व-संशुद्धिः ज्ञान-योग-व्यवस्थितिः
 दानम् दमः च यज्ञः च स्वाध्यायः तपः आर्जवम्॥
 अहिंसा सत्यम् अक्रोधः त्यागः शान्तिः अपैशुनम्।
 भूतेषु दया अलोलुप्त्वम् मार्दवम् ह्रीः अचापलम्॥
 भारत तेजः क्षमा धृतिः शौचम् अद्रोहः न अति-मानिता
 दैवीम् सम्पदम् अभिजातस्य भवन्ति॥
 पार्थ दम्भः दर्पः अभिमानः च क्रोधः पारुष्यम्।
 एव च अज्ञानम् च आसुरीम् सम्पदम् अभिजातस्य॥

The illustrious Bhagavan said, ‘O descendant of the Bharata lineage! Absence of fear, pureness of heart, steadiness in pursuit of jnana and yoga, donations, self-control, yajnas, self-study, austerities, uprightness, non-violence, truthfulness, lack of anger, renunciation, serenity, not indulging in slander, compassion towards beings, lack of avarice, gentleness, sense of shame, steadiness, energy, forgiveness, fortitude, cleanliness, lack of hatred and lack of excessive pride—these constitute the wealth for those who are born *deva*-like. O son of Pritha! Boastfulness, insolence, pride, rage, harshness and ignorance—these constitute the wealth for those who are born *asura*-like.’

13.8 to 13.11

अमानित्वमदम्भित्वमहिंसा क्षान्तिरार्जवम्।
आचार्योपासनं शौचं स्थैर्यमात्मविनिग्रहः॥
इन्द्रियार्थेषु वैराग्यमनहङ्कार एव च।
जन्ममृत्युजराव्याधिदुःखदोषानुदर्शनम्॥
असक्तिरनभिष्वङ्गः पुत्रदारगृहादिषु।

नित्यं च समचित्तत्वमिष्टानिष्टोपपत्तिषु॥
मयि चानन्ययोगेन भक्तिरव्यभिचारिणी।
विविक्तदेशसेवित्वमरतिर्जनसंसदि॥

इन्द्रिय-अर्थेषु वैराग्यम् अनहंकारः एव च
जन्म-मृत्यु-जरा-व्याधि-दुःख-दोष-अनुदर्शनम्॥
असक्तिः पुत्र-दार-गृह-आदिषु अनभिष्वङ्गः
इष्ट-अनिष्ट-उपपत्तिषु नित्यम् सम-चित्तत्वम् च॥
मयि च अनन्य-योगेन अव्यभिचारिणी भक्तिः
विविक्त-देश-सेवित्वम् जन-संसदि अरतिः॥
अध्यात्म-ज्ञान-नित्यत्वम् तत्त्व-ज्ञान-अर्थ-दर्शनम्।

एतत् ज्ञानम् इति प्रोक्तम् अज्ञानम् यत् अतः अन्यथा॥

‘Lack of pride, lack of arrogance, non-injury, forbearance, uprightness, serving the acharya, purity, steadfastness, control over one’s own self, non-attachment towards the objects of the senses, lack of *ahamkara*, indifference towards the [apparent] evils of birth, death, old age, disease and miseries, non-attachment and lack of affection towards a son, a wife, a home and other things, unwavering devotion towards me alone, frequenting solitary places, aversion towards assemblies of people, constant devotion towards *adhyatma* jnana and pursuit of true jnana and insight—these are said to be jnana. Anything that is contrary is *ajnana*.’

Let’s pause for a minute. Notice that I have deliberately left the word acharya untranslated, because of what I said about acharya and guru earlier. Let’s press the pause button on *ahamkara* and *adhyatma* for the moment.

We will come back to these two words later. Notice that I have also used the word non-attachment. I prefer that to detachment. Detachment suggests I was attached and have now become detached. Non-attachment suggests not being attached to start off with. You will notice that 16.1 to 16.4 seem to repeat some of the things that have already been said in 13.8 to 13.11. There is logic in the chapters of the Bhagavad Gita, as it progressively builds up. But there is also some repetition. Think of it this way. In a talk there are two kinds of formats you would be familiar with: (a) A speaker delivers a talk, with or without questions and answers (Q&A) at the end; (b) From the beginning, there is a moderator who prods the speaker with questions. (a) is more like a lecture while (b) is more like a discussion on TV. For the speaker, the logical flow will be different between (a) and (b). In the case of (b), the flow is a function of the questions asked by the moderator. The Bhagavad Gita is like (b), with Arjuna being the person who asks the questions. That's the reason, within the broad framework of progression across the chapters, it sometimes goes back and forth.

If you read 16.1 to 16.4 again, you might wonder—what is so special about the Bhagavad Gita? These shlokas set out norms for good behaviour and bad behaviour, as every society does. To be virtuous, this is what you need to do. If you do the opposite instead, you are wicked and evil. 16.11 to 16.16 describe these wicked traits in greater detail and we are familiar with many of them. Do remember what I said about the structure of the Sanskrit language? Therefore, the translations may sound incomplete, in the sense that the subjects are missing. As for the question about the Bhagavad Gita being special, be patient. I will come to that in due course.

16.11 to 16.16

चिन्तामपरिमेयां च प्रलयान्तामुपाश्रिताः।
कामोपभोगपरमा एतावदिति निश्चिताः॥
आशापाशशतैर्बद्धाः कामक्रोधपरायणाः।
ईहन्ते कामभोगार्थमन्यायेनार्थसञ्चयान्॥
इदमद्य मया लब्धमिमं प्राप्स्ये मनोरथम्।

इदमस्तीदमपि मे भविष्यति पुनर्धनम्॥
 असौ मया हतः शत्रुर्हनिष्ये चापरानपि।
 ईश्वरोऽहमहं भोगी सिद्धोऽहं बलवान्सुखी॥
 आढ्योऽभिजनवानस्मि कोऽन्योऽस्ति सदृशो मया।
 यक्ष्ये दास्यामि मोदिष्ये इत्यज्ञानविमोहिताः॥
 अनेकचित्तविभ्रान्ता मोहजालसमावृताः।
 प्रसक्ताः कामभोगेषु पतन्ति नरकेऽशुचौ॥
 अपरिमेयाम् प्रलयान्ताम् चिन्ताम् उपाश्रिताः
 काम-उपभोग-परमाः च एतावत् इति निश्चिताः॥
 आशा-पाश-शतैः बद्धाः काम-क्रोध-परायणाः
 काम-भोगार्थम् अन्यायेन अर्थ-सञ्चयान् ईहन्ते॥
 अद्य इदम् मया लब्धम् इमम् मनोरथम् प्राप्स्ये।
 इदम् धनम् अस्ति इदम् अपि मे पुनः भविष्यति॥
 असौ शत्रुः मया हतः अपरान् च अपि हनिष्ये
 अहम् ईश्वरः अहं भोगी अहम् सिद्धः बलवान् सुखी॥
 आढ्यः अभिजनवान् अस्मि मया सदृशः कः अन्यः अस्ति
 यक्ष्ये दास्यामि मोदिष्ये इति अज्ञान-विमोहिताः॥
 अनेक-चित्त-विभ्रान्ताः मोह-जाल-समावृताः
 काम-भोगेषु प्रसक्ताः अशुचौ नरके पतन्ति॥

‘Obsessed by immeasurable thoughts till the time of destruction [that is, death], certainly convinced that the enjoyment of objects of desire is supreme; tied down with the noose of a hundred hopes, prone to desire and anger, and wishing to use unjust means for desire, objects of pleasure and accumulation of wealth; “I have got this today. I will get that desired object too. I have this. That wealth will also become mine. This enemy has been killed by me and I will kill others. I am the lord. I am the enjoyer. I am successful, strong and happy. I am wealthy and of noble descent. Who is

there who is equal to me? I will perform a sacrifice. I will donate. I will find delight.” They are thus confounded by *ajnana*; distracted by many thoughts, enveloped in the net of delusion, attached to desire and objects of pleasure, they descend into an impure hell.’

If you remember, I used the word *tapas* earlier, as in austerities or asceticism. There are four *ashramas* or stages of life—*brahmacharya*, *garhasthya*, *vanaprastha* and *sannyasa*. In very loose terms, *brahmacharya* is described as celibate student-hood, *garhasthya* is described as the householder stage, *vanaprastha* is described as the stage of retiring to the forest and *sannyasa* is described as the ultimate stage of becoming an ascetic, hermit or sage. If you live to be 100 years: twenty-five years for *brahmacharya*, twenty-five years for *garhasthya*, twenty-five years for *vanaprastha* and twenty-five years for *sannyasa*. This is an attempt by the external world to force individuals to adhere to a standard template. That template wasn’t the norm even then. Following the path of the *brahman* is *brahmacharya*. Translating *brahmacharya* only as celibacy is inappropriate. Indeed, several texts say *brahmacharya* is not celibacy but sexual intercourse within the prescribed norms, such as only with one’s own wife. Similarly, *sannyasa* doesn’t mean renunciation, but establishing oneself in the path of the truth. If *sannyasa* is taken to be renunciation, in that day and age, how many people became that? Think of the *ashramavasika* parva of the Mahabharata. Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Kunti and Vidura retired to the forest. Was that *vanaprastha* or was that *sannyasa*? I think it was *vanaprastha*. Think of the blind couple in the Valmiki Ramayana, whose son Dasharatha shot by mistake. Was that *vanaprastha* or was that *sannyasa*? I think that too was *vanaprastha*. There will indeed be people who resort to *sannyasa* and they won’t necessarily wait till they become seventy-five years old to do so. Bhutan is a country where there are a lot of monks, something between 10,000 and 12,000. That’s around 1.5 per cent of the population. But do remember that in a country like Bhutan, there is government funding for monks. Even if there is community funding of monks, as opposed to government funding, a very small share of the population will become monks. The bulk of the population will consist of those who are in *brahmacharya* and *garhasthya* stages. How many will resort to the forest today? *Vanaprastha* is an attempt to trigger detachment from the material world through physical distancing from the material world. Our challenge is to remain in the material world and ensure

detachment or non-attachment. Most of us, then and now, are householders. Therefore, the Bhagavad Gita remains equally relevant for us.

Individuals vary in their traits and inclinations. That fourfold *ashrama* classification is an artificial and forced attempt to oversimplify and straitjacket us. Even if one has in mind a template for progress through life, I think that the संस्कार (*samskaras*) idea offers a better template than *ashramas*. I am not particularly fond of the English translation ‘rite of passage’. *Samskara* has a nuance of cleansing and purification, which is why each *samskara* is associated with taking a bath, as one moves from one stage of life to the next. I am aware that the listing of *samskaras* varies from text to text. I can increase the number to sixteen, or even forty-eight. But there shouldn’t be any dispute that the more important ones are the following: (1) *Vivaha* (विवाह) or marriage; (2) *Garbhadana* (गर्भाधान) —note that this is not the same thing as rituals undertaken by a new couple to set up a household together, including the first act of sexual intercourse. *Garbhadana* is not merely an act of physical intercourse, it is an act of physical intercourse with a view to having a child; (3) *Pumsavana* (पुंसवन) —this is after there is a pregnancy and is designed to ensure the birth of a male child; (4) *Simantonnayana* (सीमन्तोन्नयन) —I guess one has to translate this as parting of the hair. Married women are often referred to as *simantini* (सीमन्तिनी), because of that parting of the hair. If I am going to be pedantic, with that qualification about material varying across sacred texts, that’s not quite correct. A married woman becomes *simantini* when she has conceived and that pregnancy has been successfully carried through to something like the eighth month, it typically being the third month for *pumsavana*; (5) *Jatakarman* (जातकर्मन्) —the rituals for a newborn child; (6) *Namakarana* (नामकरण) —naming of the child; (7) *Annaprashana* (अन्नप्राशन) the first time the child is offered solid food; (8) *Chudakarana* (चूडाकरण) —tonsure; (9) *Upanayana* (उपनयन) —note that this is not the same as the child having started to study. You can call this a sacred thread ceremony, but it has the nuance of a teacher having accepted that the student is fit to be taught; (10) *Samavartana* (समावर्तन) —returning home after studies have been successfully completed. This is a bit like a graduation ceremony and graduates are called *snatakas* (स्नातक) because they have a bath (*snana*) before the ceremony; and (11) *Anteyshti* (अन्त्येष्टि) —last rites after death. My purpose is not to discuss these *samskaras*. I only wanted to flag that I find this more useful than the mechanical timeline of the four *ashramas*.

Sannyasa also means adherence to the path of the truth. In that sense, even if we are householders, we can adhere to the path of the truth. Those traits of good behaviour are *tapas*. They are a process of purification, as shlokas 17.14 to 17.16 state. These are three shlokas I have already quoted earlier.

2.14 and 2.15

मात्रास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः।
आगमापायिनोऽनित्यास्तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत॥
यं हि न व्यथयन्त्येते पुरुषं पुरुषर्षभ।
समदुःखसुखं धीरं सोऽमृतत्वाय कल्पते॥
कौन्तेय मात्रा-स्पर्शाः तु शीत-उष्ण-सुख-दुःख-दाः
आगम अपायिनः अनित्याः भारत तान् तितिक्षस्व॥
पुरुष-ऋषभ हि यम् सम-दुःख-सुखम् धीरम् पुरुषम्
एते न व्यथयन्ति सः अमृतत्वाय कल्पते॥

‘O son of Kunti! Because of contact between the senses and the objects [of the senses], feelings of hot and cold and pleasure and pain result. But these are temporary. They come and go. O descendant of the Bharata lineage! Therefore, tolerate them. O best among men! The persevering man, who is not distressed by these and looks upon pleasure and pain impartially, is worthy of becoming immortal.’

2.55 to 2.58

श्रीभगवानुवाच

प्रजहाति यदा कामान् सर्वान् पार्थ मनोगतान्।
आत्मन्येवात्मना तुष्टः स्थितप्रज्ञस्तदोच्यते॥
दुःखेष्वनुद्विग्नमनाः सुखेषु विगतस्पृहः।
वीतरागभयक्रोधः स्थितधीर्मुनिरुच्यते॥
यः सर्वत्रानभिस्नेहस्तत्तत्प्राप्य शुभाशुभम्।
नाभिनन्दति न द्वेष्टि तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता॥
यदा संहरते चायं कूर्मोऽङ्गानीव सर्वशः।
इन्द्रियाणीन्द्रियार्थेभ्यस्तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता॥
पार्थ यदा मनोगतान् सर्वान् कामान् प्रजहाति।
आत्मनि एव आत्मना तुष्टः तदा स्थितप्रज्ञः उच्यते॥
दुःखेषु अनुद्विग्न-मनाः सुखेषु विगत-स्पृहः
वीत-राग-भय-क्रोधः मुनिः स्थितधीः उच्यते॥
यः सर्वत्र अनभिस्नेहः तत् तत् शुभ-अशुभम् प्राप्य
न अभिनन्दति न द्वेष्टि तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता॥
कूर्मः अङ्गानि इव यदा अयम् इन्द्रिय-अर्थेभ्यः
इन्द्रियाणि सर्वशः संहरते तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता च॥

The illustrious Bhagavan said, 'O Partha! A person is said to be steady in his wisdom when he casts aside all desires from his mind. He is satisfied in his own *atman*. In the midst of unhappiness, his mind is not anxious. He has no attachment towards happiness. He is devoid of attachment, fear and anger. He is then spoken of as a sage [notice the use of the word muni again] who is steady in his wisdom. He has no love for anything, whether something good or bad has been obtained. He is not delighted. Nor does he hate. Wisdom is established in him. Just as a tortoise draws in all of its

limbs, in everything, he withdraws his senses from the objects of the senses. Wisdom is established in him.’

2.62 to 2.64

ध्यायतो विषयान्पुंसः सङ्गस्तेषूपजायते।
सङ्गात् संजायते कामः कामात्क्रोधोऽभिजायते॥
क्रोधाद्भावति संमोहः संमोहात्स्मृतिविभ्रमः।
स्मृतिभ्रंशाद् बुद्धिनाशो बुद्धिनाशात्प्रणश्यति॥
रागद्वेषवियुक्तैस्तु विषयानिन्द्रियैश्चरन्।
आत्मवश्यैर्विधेयात्मा प्रसादमधिगच्छति॥
विषयान् ध्यायतः पुंसः तेषु सङ्गः उपजायते।
सङ्गात् कामः सञ्जायते कामात् क्रोधः अभिजायते॥
क्रोधात् सम्मोहः भवति सम्मोहात् स्मृति-विभ्रमः
स्मृति-भ्रंशात् बुद्धि-नाशः बुद्धि-नाशात् प्रणश्यति॥
राग-द्वेष-वियुक्तैः तु विषयान् इन्द्रियैः चरन्।
आत्म-वश्यैः विधेय-आत्मा प्रसादम् अधिगच्छति॥

‘If a man thinks about material objects, this gives birth to attachment for them. From attachment is created desire and desire gives birth to anger. Anger gives birth to delusion and delusion leads to loss of memory. Loss of memory leads to destruction of the intellect. When the intellect is destroyed, he is destroyed. But if a man has subdued his *atman* and is in control of himself, even when his senses wander around material objects, he is free from attachment or hatred and obtains serenity.’

16.21

त्रिविधं नरकस्येदं द्वारं नाशनमात्मनः।
कामः क्रोधस्तथा लोभस्तस्मादेतत्त्रयं त्यजेत्॥
कामः क्रोधः तथा लोभः इदम् त्रिविधम् आत्मनः नाशनम्।
नरकस्य द्वारम् तस्मात् एतत् त्रयम् त्यजेत्॥

‘Desire, anger and avarice—these are the three gates to hell and they destroy the *atman*. Therefore, give these three up.’

3.34

इन्द्रियस्येन्द्रियस्यार्थे रागद्वेषौ व्यवस्थितौ।
तयोर्न वशमागच्छेत्तौ ह्यस्य परिपन्थिनौ॥
इन्द्रियस्य-अर्थे इन्द्रियस्य राग-द्वेषौ व्यवस्थितौ
तयोः वशम् न आगच्छेत् तौ हि अस्य परिपन्थिनौ॥

‘Each sense develops attachment and aversion for the corresponding object of the sense. One should not come under the subjugation of those. Those are adversaries.’

The texts speak of six vices—*kama* (काम) or desire, *krodha* (क्रोध) or anger, *lobha* (लोभ) or avarice, *moha* (मोह) or delusion, *mada* (मद) or insolence and *matsarya* (मात्सर्य) or envy. What do I gain from reading the Bhagavad Gita? That’s a valid question to ask. But there is another question that is equally valid and it is the obverse. What do I lose from reading the Bhagavad Gita? I lose these vices, progressively, as I pursue the path of self-realization more and more. Notice that all these are transitory. *Kama* is not merely sensual or sexual desire, though it is a major form. Unfortunately, *Kama Sutra* for dummies makes us think *kama* is only about sex. For example, Vatsayana’s *Kama Sutra* is probably the best known, though it doesn’t necessarily make it the most read text on *kama*. The present manuscripts available to us of Vatsayana’s *Kama Sutra* have thirty-six chapters and seven books. Pick up any of the coffee table-type books on this text, and you will find it is typically about a few chapters from the second book, not about any of the other chapters or any of the other books. That is because it is those chosen chapters, on sexual positions, that titillate

us. *Kama* is much more than that. But think about what you desire. What you desired at the age of ten seems so irrelevant now. Some other kid possessed a toy and you hankered after it. Do you still want that toy today? This is true of desire and it is also true of avarice. You want something and you get it. Are you satisfied? No, because once you get that, you hanker after something else. Someone said something and you were angry, temporarily. The moment of anger passed. A week later, you laugh at that trigger for anger. It was so momentary. You were so proud of the marks you got in an examination in school. Is that still a reason for pride? When you were younger, you were proud of your luxuriant hair. Now that you have started to lose your hair, is that a reason for pride any more? At one point, you were so envious of what another person possessed. Two decades down the line, the reason for jealousy seems juvenile. So far, I have not mentioned delusion (*moha*). This is a bit like emotional attachments that bind and hinder us, excess BMI in the mind. These are vices not merely because we do the wrong things while pursuing them. They are also vices because they are temporary. If I wish to find out who I am, I cannot, and should not, seek a definition based on the temporary. The answer must have some permanence.

This is also the reason why asking boons from gods is such a terrible idea. If I pass in this examination, I will give up this particular vice. If I recover from that disease, I will perform that sacrifice. In the Markandeya Purana, there is a section which goes by the name of ‘Devi Mahatmya, Chandi or Durga Saptashati’. In one of the hymns addressed to her, there is a refrain रूपं देहि जयं देहि यशो देहि द्विषो जहि. ‘Grant me beauty. Grant me victory. Grant me fame. Slay my enemies.’ If you grant me these, I will pray to you and perform sacrifices for you. There are several problems with this approach. First, a god/goddess doesn’t indulge in contractual quid pro quo relations. That’s the preserve of humans, a point also made in the movie *Oh My God!* In the Bible, the first chapter of Genesis states: ‘And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’ This is more like humans using a human image to create a god with human behavioural attributes. Second, if we accept the possibility of a god/goddess who is pleased with worship and sacrifices and accordingly rewards the worshipper, in the absence of these being offered, we must admit the possibility of a vengeful god/goddess too. He/she will punish us, not only for breach of contract, but also for not signing a contract in the first place. This reminds me of the two-

faced Roman god Janus, after whom the month of January is named. A god becomes no different from a devil, depending on how you deal with the contract. Janus was in charge of gates and the same etymological root gives us the word 'janitor'. I can visualize a janitor who behaves in this way, not a proper god/goddess. Third, this notion of paying a price to get something is a very dangerous one. You may end up getting what you wanted, but not in the exact form you wanted it. You may end up paying a price, but not quite the price you intended. There is a quid in the quid pro quo. There is a price to be paid. Such situations remind me of a story written by W.W. Jacobs in 1902. The story is titled, 'The Monkey's Paw'. It is about Mr and Mrs White and their son Herbert. In its bare bones, the plot is the following. The Whites have a friend who worked in the British army in India. Where else? This retired friend acquired a shrivelled monkey's paw, given to him by an Indian sage. The monkey's paw has the blessing, if that is the word to use, to grant the owner three wishes. If you ask for more than three wishes, there will be trouble. Having acquired the monkey's paw from the friend, Mr White asks for some money. That is the first wish. Lo and behold! The couple get the money Mr White asks for, but as compensation. Their son, Herbert, is killed in an accident in the factory. Mr and Mrs White are distraught and Herbert is buried. A few days later, Mrs White takes out the monkey's paw and wishes that Herbert should return from the dead. That is the second wish. There is a knock at the door and a frightful apparition appears, not as Mrs White had imagined him, but as Herbert now is. Therefore, with the third wish, the terrified Mr White desires that the spectre should go away and it vanishes. That's the story.

Fourth, when we are interested in material objects and gains, we are interested in stuff that is transient in nature. Why should a god/goddess ever do that? (a) Gods do not operate on the basis of quid pro quos. Quid pro quos, giving something in return for something else taken, is a feature of human relationships, not a divine one. (b) If the gods are going to bestow something on us, why should they give us something that is temporary and of transient interest?

A quid pro quo shouldn't be the basis of human relationships. वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्— this is an expression one encounters all the time. वसुधा + एव कुटुम्बकम् is how it is broken up. Translated, this means 'The world is indeed a family.' No expression should be plucked out of context, ignoring the rest of a shloka. Unfortunately, that invariably happens with

vasudhaiva kutumbakam. The complete shloka states: अयं निजो परो वेति गणना लघुचेतसाम्। उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्॥ ‘This calculation of what is mine and what is someone else’s is for a narrow-minded person. For a person who is generous of heart, the world is indeed a family.’ The ordinary person doesn’t show a *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* mindset. It is meant for those who are exceptional. Where is the original text from? It occurs in *Hitopadesha*, *Panchatantra*, *Vikaramacharita* and *Mahopanishad*. There is also indiscriminate usage of the expression अतिथि देवो भव, translated as, ‘the guest is like a god’. The sense is correct, but the translation is awful. That word भव has the sense of ‘to be’. Is the guest being asked to be like a god? Is a god being asked to be like a guest? None of these. The text is from the Taittiriya Upanishad, the second shloka in the eleventh *anuvaka*. This part is also known as *shikshavalli*. A disciple is actually being addressed and told मातृदेवो भव। पितृदेवो भव। आचार्यदेवो भव। अतिथिदेवो भव। ‘Be one to whom the mother is like a god, the father is like a god, the preceptor is like a god and a guest is like a god.’ अतिथि means guest, but that expression is an interesting one. अ + तिथि makes up अतिथि, तिथि is a specific day. On a day when there is a feast or a festival, you expect guests and visitors to turn up. Therefore, you expect to offer them food and treat them well. An *atithi* isn’t that kind of guest at all. He/she turns up uninvited and unannounced and you still treat such a guest well, like a god. Traditionally, whenever a guest turns up, he/she is offered *padya* (water to wash the feet), *arghya* (a gift), *achamaniya* (water to rinse the mouth) and *asana* (a seat). These days, when someone invites us, we always take along a gift. In a way, this turns things upside down. I haven’t done a guest a favour by inviting him/her home. He/she has done me the honour of visiting my home and offering me the opportunity to serve him/her. It is the same way for *dana*—gifts or donations. The donor, no matter how generous, shows no favours to the recipient. Instead, the recipient shows a favour to the donor by providing the opportunity. Most of us are in *garhasthya ashrama*, the householder stage of life. Translating a *yajna* as sacrifice or worship doesn’t convey its complete sense. Nevertheless, as householders, there are five *maha yajnas* (great sacrifices) we have to perform: oblations to gods (*deva yajna*), studying (*rishi yajna*), oblations to ancestors (*pitri yajna*), offering food to birds and animals (*bhuta yajna*) and hospitality towards guests (*atithi yajna*).

There is a story about a fowler and two pigeons. This is in Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata, but finds a place in some Puranas too. A fowler made his living from catching and selling wild birds. He went to the forest to do this and caught a female pigeon, imprisoning it in a cage. It was a cold night. A storm was brewing. He sought refuge under a tree, the very tree under which the pigeon couple had made their nest. Since his wife had gone out and not returned, the male pigeon lamented. From inside the cage, the female pigeon heard this lament and replied that he shouldn't worry about her. Instead, they should tend to the guest. Since the fowler was cold, the male pigeon collected some dry leaves and lit a fire. Now that he was warm, the fowler was hungry. The male pigeon threw himself into the fire to provide food to the fowler. You should read the Mahabharata (or Puranas) to find out what happened to the female pigeon and the fowler. This isn't the only story of its kind, nor the only one where birds sacrifice themselves for guests. In *Karma Yoga*, Swami Vivekananda recounts another such story, where unexpected guests arrived in a forest.³⁵ An entire family of birds—mother bird, father bird and three small birds—immolated themselves in a fire so that the guests could have food to eat. Nor should one forget Yudhishtira and the mongoose. When Yudhishtira conducted a horse sacrifice, after the Kurukshetra War was over, a mongoose turned up at the sacrifice. Half of its body was golden. The mongoose thought Yudhishtira's sacrifice was not all that great. Quizzed, the mongoose came out with the story. There was a brahmana family to whose home an unexpected guest had turned up. The family had very little food, only a handful. For the sake of the guest, one by one, the brahmana, his wife, his son and his daughter-in-law, gave up the little bit of food they possessed. When the mongoose rubbed its body on the dust there, half of its body turned golden. It roamed around, visiting other sacrifices, in the hope that the remaining half of its body would turn golden too. But there was no such luck, not even at Yudhishtira's sacrifice. The point about all these examples is that there is no quid pro quo. But let us return to the Bhagavad Gita.

To figure out who we are, let's eliminate the transient.

भोगैश्वर्यप्रसक्तानां तयापहतचेतसाम्।
व्यवसायात्मिका बुद्धिः समाधौ न विधीयते॥
भोग-ऐश्वर्य-प्रसक्तानाम् तया अपहत-चेतसाम्
बुद्धिः व्यवसाय-आत्मिका समाधौ न विधीयते॥

‘They are addicted to objects of pleasure and wealth and because their minds are distracted by these, they cannot focus their intelligence and discriminate to pursue meditation.’

3.37

श्रीभगवानुवाच

काम एष क्रोध एष रजोगुणसमुद्भवः।
महाशनो महापाप्मा विद्ध्येनमिह वैरिणम्॥
कामः एषः क्रोधः एषः रजः गुण-समुद्भवः।
महा-अशनः महा-पाप्मा विद्धि एनम् इह वैरिणम्॥

The illustrious Bhagavan said, ‘This is desire. This is anger. This is born from the quality of *rajas*. These devour everything and are great sins. Know that here [in this world], they are enemies.’ In this shloka, only two of the six vices are specifically mentioned. But the implication covers all the vices.

16.10

काममाश्रित्य दुष्पूरं दम्भमानमदान्विताः।
मोहाद्गृहीत्वासद्ग्राहान्प्रवर्तन्तेऽशुचिव्रताः॥
दुष्पूरम् कामम् आश्रित्य मोहात् असत् ग्राहान् गृहीत्वा
अशुचि-व्रताः दम्भ-मान-मद-अन्विताः प्रवर्तन्ते॥

‘They seek refuge in insatiable desires and in their delusion, are full of insolence, pride and arrogance. They perform impure rites and accepting

what is not true, act.’

5.26

कामक्रोधवियुक्तानां यतीनां यतचेतसाम्।
अभितो ब्रह्मनिर्वाणं वर्तते विदितात्मनाम्॥
काम-क्रोध-वियुक्तानाम् यतीनाम् यत-चेतसाम्।
अभितः ब्रह्म-निर्वाणं वर्तते विदित-आत्मनाम्॥

‘Freed from desire and anger, ascetics who have controlled their minds and know their *atmans*, obtain *nirvana* in the presence of the *brahman*.’

2.67 and 2.68

इन्द्रियाणां हि चरतां यन्मनोऽनुविधीयते।
तदस्य हरति प्रज्ञां वायुर्नावमिवाम्भसि॥
चरताम् इन्द्रियाणाम् हि यत् मनः अनुविधीयते
तत् अस्य प्रज्ञाम् अम्भसि हरति वायुः नावम् इव॥
तस्माद्यस्य महाबाहो निगृहीतानि सर्वशः।
इन्द्रियाणीन्द्रियार्थेभ्यस्तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता॥
तस्मात् महा-बाहो यस्य इन्द्रियाणि इन्द्रिय-अर्थेभ्यः
सर्वशः निगृहीतानि तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता॥

‘The wind carries away a boat on the water. Likewise, when the mind follows the wandering objects of the senses, a person’s wisdom is carried away. O mighty-armed one! Therefore, if a person restrains his senses from following the objects of the senses in every possible way, wisdom is steadily established in him.’

The texts speak of three objectives of human existence: *dharma*, *artha* and *kama*. These are known as *purusharthas* (पुरुषार्थ). Sometimes, a fourth, *moksha*, is added. I have used the word *dharma* earlier, but have not attempted to translate it. The meaning of *dharma* depends on the context

and the word is therefore impossible to translate. In that sense, it is a bit like yoga or karma. Independent of context, these words can't really be translated. *Artha* is not wealth alone, but prosperity in general. Most of us are subject to the wheel of existence, from birth to death, known as *samsara*, or worldly existence. Moksha or *mukti* (मुक्तिः) is liberation from *samsara*, from birth or death. Literally, *nirvana* means a state of being extinguished. In effect, this is the same as *mukti* or moksha. But, as I said, liberation is for a limited few. The rest of us are bound in this cycle of existence. Therefore, we will pursue dharma, *artha* and *kama*. As the shlokas I have just quoted indicate, the Bhagavad Gita isn't against this pursuit, far from it. But all the texts talk about a balance between the three objectives and warn about any of these objectives being pursued in excess. The Bhagavad Gita also warns about being attached to any of these objectives. It is the addiction that is condemned. Sometimes, we don't realize the difference, which is an important one. Let us take an example. Many of us have heard the expression, 'Money is the root of all evil.' We have heard it and we often quote it. The original is from the Bible. The correct quote, in an English language translation is, 'The love of money is the root of all evil.' The entire meaning changes.

I am going to end this chapter with a story from the Bhagavata Purana. I have mentioned this text before. The Bhagavata Purana is one of the important Puranas. The edifice of Vaishnava theology is explained in the Bhagavata Purana and the Bhagavata Purana builds on what has been stated in the Bhagavad Gita. But that theology is not directly relevant for us. Instead, I will tell you the story of King Puranjana. It is an allegory, and therefore, I will need to explain the allegory as I go along. Hence, you will find some sentences within brackets. The story is told by Rishi Narada. I am going to give you almost a word for word translation. Consequently, the language might sound a bit stilted. It is a long story. I told you the Bhagavata Purana builds on many notions in the Bhagavad Gita. And this Puranjana story, in the wonderful form of an allegory, builds on what the Bhagavad Gita tells us.

There was a king named Puranjana and his fame was extensive. He had a friend named Avijnata, since his activities could not be detected. (Puranjana means someone who lives inside a city, the body being compared to a city. Avijnata is the *atman*.) Searching for a refuge, the king wandered over the entire earth. He could not find anything that appealed to

him and he became distressed. He wished to satisfy his desires and did not think that any of the cities on earth were good enough to satisfy what he was after. On one occasion, on the southern slopes of the Himalayas, he saw a city with nine gates and it possessed all the auspicious marks. (The nine gates of the body are two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, the mouth, the anus and the genital organs.) There were ramparts, gardens, mansions, moats, windows and arches. There were many houses everywhere and the tops of the houses were made out of gold, silver and iron. There were assembly halls, quadrangles, highways, gambling houses, markets, dwelling houses, decorations of flags and festoons, parks and platforms. Outside the city, there was a grove filled with celestial trees and creepers. There was a lake filled with the calling of birds and the humming of bees. The banks of the lake were beautiful because of the trees. Their branches fluttered, because the cool breeze brought with it spray from waterfalls and the fragrance of flowers. The forest was filled with many animals. Travellers thought they were being invited by the calling of cuckoos. He saw a beautiful woman there, wandering around as she pleased. There were ten servants with her and each was the husband of one hundred wives. (Continuing with the allegory, the woman is intelligence or *buddhi* and the ten servants are the ten senses, five of perception and five of action. Each sense has several inclinations, that is, the wives.) In every direction, she was guarded by a serpent with five hoods. (The five hoods are *prana*, *apana*, *vyana*, *samana* and *udana*, the five flows of the breath of life.) She could assume any form at will. She was young and was searching for a husband. Her nose was excellent. Her teeth were excellent. She was young, with an excellent forehead. Her face was beautiful. Her ears were symmetric, ornamented with shining earrings. Around her sensuous hips, the maiden wore a yellow garment with a golden girdle atop it. When she walked, like a resident of heaven, the anklets on her feet tinkled. Her breasts were rounded, with the signs of youth and with no space between them. As she walked like a female elephant, out of shame, she covered her breasts with the end of her garment. Her smile was bashful and charming.

Her sidelong glances were like arrows shot from the bow of her eyebrows. The brave one was smitten by love and addressed her in gentle words: ‘O one with eyes like the petals of lotuses! Who are you? Who do you belong to? Where have you come from? O timid one! What do you wish to do in this city? Tell me. Who are the ten great warriors who follow

you? Who is the eleventh? O one with the excellent eyebrows! Who are these women? Who is the serpent preceding you? Are you Hri, Bhavani or the goddess of speech? (Modesty personified, Parvati and Sarasvati, respectively.) Wandering like a sage in this forest, are you searching for a husband? Has he satisfied all his wishes at your lotus feet, which are desirable? Are you the one who resides on a lotus (Lakshmi) and has the lotus been dislodged from your hand? O one with the beautiful thighs! Since your feet touch the ground, you cannot be any of these. With me, supreme among brave ones and glorious in deeds, you should decorate this city, just as Shri (Lakshmi) ornaments the world, along with the lord of sacrifices (Vishnu). Your bashful and sidelong glances have excited my senses. Your smiles and eyebrows have bewildered me. Touched by you, the illustrious god of love has agitated me. O beautiful one! Show me your favours. Your face is charming, with the excellent eyebrows. Your eyes have excellent pupils. Your face is encircled by locks of bluish-black hair. O one with the beautiful smiles! Because of your shyness, you are not looking at me.’ Like an impatient person, Puranjana beseeched the woman. She was also bewitched by the brave one. She smiled and greeted him, ‘O lord! We do not accurately know who our creator is. Nor do we know ourselves, or others, our *gotras*, our names or who has created us. We know that we exist here now and we do not know anything beyond that. O brave one! We do not know who constructed this city, where we seek a refuge for ourselves. O one who grants honours! These men and women are my male and female friends. When I sleep, they remain awake. This serpent guards the city. O fortunate one! It is good fortune that you have come here. O destroyer of enemies! With my friends, I will provide you with whatever ordinary sensual pleasures you wish to satisfy. O lord! Please reside in this city with nine gates. For one hundred years, I will bring you all the objects of your desire. Accept them. How can I enjoy those with a person who does not know about sexual pleasures, a person who is ignorant about the next world and who does not look forward to the future? Such a person is like an animal. One obtains dharma, *artha*, *kama*, joy from offspring, immortality and fame in this world, without any sorrow and without any disease. Those who know about non-attachment are ignorant of that. It is said that in this world, the welfare of ancestors, gods, rishis, living beings and one’s own self is ensured by a mortal person through the state of a householder. O brave one! You are famous and handsome. Why will a person like me not

accept a beloved husband like you? O mighty-armed one! O one whose arms are like the coils of a serpent! Which woman on earth will not be attracted to the idea of being embraced by your arms? Through your favours, you are adequate to remove the hardships of those who are without a protector. You roam around, with your smiling glances.’ Thus, the couple entered into an agreement.

They entered the city, enjoying themselves there for one hundred years. Here and there, singers praised Puranjana in pleasant notes. When it was too hot, surrounded by women, he would enter the lake. Seven of the gates of the city were above and two were below. (The two eyes, the two nostrils, the two ears and the mouth were above. The genital organs and the anus were below.) All these were for different purposes and the king used them accordingly. Five gates were to the east, one was to the south, one was to the north and two were to the west. (When one faced the east, the two eyes, the two nostrils and the mouth faced the east. The right ear was to the south and the left ear was to the north. The genital organs and the anus were to the west.) Khadyota and Avirmukhi (the two eyes) were two gates to the east that were fashioned together. Using these, with his friend Dyumat, he used to go to the region named Vibhrajit. Nalini and Naalini (the two nostrils) were two gates to the east, fashioned together. With his friend Avadhuta, he used these to go to the region named Sourabha. The fifth gate in front was named Mukhya (the mouth). With Rasajna and Vipana, the king of the city used these to go to the regions named Apana and Bahudana. The southern gate of the city was known as Pitrihu. (The right ear hears rituals that are for the path of the ancestors or *pitris*.) Along with Shrutadhara, Puranjana used this to go the region of Dakshina-Panchala. The southern gate of the city was known as Devahu. (The left ear hears rituals that are for the path of the gods or *devas*.) Along with Shrutadhara, Puranjana used this to go to the region of Uttara-Panchala. To the west was the gate named Asuri. (Named after the *asuras*.) Accompanied by Durmada, Puranjana used this to go to the region named Gramaka. (Where one indulges in *gramya* or sensual and sexual pursuits.) To the west was also the gate named Nirriti. Accompanied by Lubdhaka, Puranjana used this to go to the region named Vaishasa. Among the citizens who were blind, there were two named Nirvaka and Peshaskrita. (Literally, without speech and without form.)

The king did exactly what his queen desired. When she drank, he would drink liquor and become senseless and intoxicated. When she ate, he ate.

When she chewed, he chewed. When she sang, he sang. When she wept, he wept. When she conversed, he conversed. When she ran, he ran. When she stood, he stood. When she lay down on the bed, he lay down. When she was seated, he sat down. When she heard, he heard. When she saw, he saw. When she smelt, he smelt. When she touched, he touched. When his wife grieved, he too grieved like a distressed person. When she enjoyed, he enjoyed. When she was happy, he was happy. He was so captivated by his queen that his nature was deceived. Though he didn't wish it, like an ignorant person, he followed her. He was as helpless as a domesticated animal.

One day, the great archer was astride his chariot, yoked to five horses and was advancing swiftly. There were two shafts, two wheels, one axle, three bamboo poles, five joints between the yoke and the pole, one rein, one charioteer, one seat, two poles for the yoke, five types of weapons, seven bumpers and five kinds of movement. He was adorned in golden ornaments. His armour and inexhaustible quivers were made of gold. There were eleven commanders and he went to the forest of Panchaprastha. (One must remember this is an allegory. The chariot is his body, the five horses are the five senses, the two shafts are notions of 'I' and 'mine', the two wheels are good deeds and bad deeds, the axle is innate nature, the three bamboo poles are the three *gunas*—*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, the five joints between the yoke and the pole are the five aspects of the breath of life, the rein is the mind, the charioteer is intelligence, the seat is the heart, the two poles for the yoke are grief and delusion, the five types of equipment are the five objects of the senses, the seven bumpers are the seven sheaths of the body, the five kinds of movement are the five organs of action, the bow is attachment, the inexhaustible quiver represents infinite desire and the eleven commanders are the ten senses and the mind.) Proudly, he picked up his bow and arrows and wandered about on a hunt. He hankered after the hunt. Though she did not deserve it, he left his wife behind. He followed the conduct of the *asuras*. His heart was terrible and he was without compassion. Using his sharp arrows, in that forest, he killed many forest-dwellers. It is decreed that in the waterholes in a forest, a king may kill animals required for a sacrifice, but only as much as is required for the purpose. It is the rule that one should not kill out of greed. If a learned man knows and performs acts in accordance with the rules, he is not touched by those acts. However, if a man is overwhelmed by pride and acts contrarily,

he is bound by those acts. He descends into the flow of the *gunas*. With his wisdom destroyed, he heads downwards. Arrows whetted on stone mangled the bodies of many. There was destruction of the distressed ones. Those who had compassion in their hearts found this impossible to tolerate. He killed hares, boars, buffaloes, oxen, *ruru* antelopes, porcupines and many other animals, regardless of whether they could be used for sacrifices or not. After this, he was overcome by exhaustion. Hungry, thirsty and tired, he withdrew and returned to his residence. Having returned, he bathed and ate the appropriate food. All his exhaustion went away.

The king of Panchala became attached to material objects and had a strong sense of 'mine'. They ended up destroying his riches. He was attached to his home, his riches and those who lived on them. As is the custom, he adorned himself with scents, unguents and garlands. Having adorned all his limbs in this way, he started to search for the queen. He was content and happy. He was extremely proud and his mind was affected by Kandarpa, the god of love. He could not see the beautiful one, the mistress of the house. Distressed, he asked the women in the inner quarters: 'O beautiful women! As used to be the case earlier, is all well with you and your mistress? Unlike earlier, the prosperity of this household does not attract me anymore, since the house is without a mother and a wife who regarded her husband as divine. It is like a shattered chariot. What wise men will reside here like a miserable person? Where is that beautiful lady? When I am submerged in an ocean of hardships, she saves me. At every step, she illuminates my intelligence.' The women replied, 'O king! We do not know why your beloved is behaving this way. O destroyer of enemies! Behold. Without a spread, she is lying down on the bare ground.' Puranjana saw his queen on the ground. Since he was attached to her, he was crushed. Not knowing the reason, he was filled with great bewilderment. With his heart shattered, he spoke to her in soft and comforting words. However, there were no signs that his beloved was feigning this because of love. The brave one, who knew how to beseech, entreated her in slow words. He touched her feet. Making her sit on his lap, he embraced her and spoke to her. He said to her, 'O beautiful one! When servants commit an inauspicious act, if their masters do not impose punishment on their wrongdoing, taking them to be their own, the servants do not learn from the punishment and are unfortunate. Punishment is a supreme favour imposed on the servant by the master. O slender one! A person who does not take

this to be a friendly act is foolish. You possess excellent teeth and charming eyebrows. Please smile and cast a loving and bashful glance at me. Your dark locks hang down, like a mass of bees. Your beautiful face has a tall nose. O spirited one! Reveal your face to those who are your own. O wife of a brave person! Other than brahmanas, if there is anyone who has committed an offence against you, I will punish him. I will ensure that he does not obtain freedom from fear and since I am a servant of Murari (Vishnu/Krishna), I will see that he does not obtain happiness in the three worlds or anywhere else. I have not seen your face so distressed, without a *tilaka* mark. Because of rage, it seems terrible. It is without radiance and without affection. I have never seen your well-formed breasts suffer so much because of grief. (They were wet with tears.) Your lips are like *bimba* fruit, but they are bereft of their reddish tinge. O loved one! Show me your favours. I have committed a crime. Overwhelmed by desire, I acted on my own and went on a hunt. Suffering from the force of the god of love, I am under your subjugation. My patience has been shattered. Acting according to duty, which beautiful woman will not unite with such a husband?' In this way, Puranjani (Puranjana's wife) used her charms to bring Puranjana under her control. She enjoyed herself, finding pleasure with her husband. The queen, the one with the beautiful face, bathed herself well and approached the king. He was content and welcomed her. Embraced by her, he embraced her back. Bereft of his senses, he used loving words to converse with her in private. He did not realize the passing of time. Night and day, he was captivated by the lady. The great-minded one was overwhelmed by this confusion. Using his queen's arms as a pillow, he lay down on an extremely expensive bed. The brave one thought that she was supreme. Overcome by *tamas*, he no longer understood what was his and what belonged to someone else. With his senses overcome by the sin of desire, he pleased with her. His youth passed away, as if it was a fleeting moment. Through Puranjani, Puranjana had one thousand and one hundred sons. However, half of his life was over. Through Puranjani, he also had one thousand and one hundred daughters and they brought fame to their father and mother. They possessed good conduct and noble qualities. The king of Panchala wished to extend the lineage of his fathers. He had his sons and daughters married to persons who were their equals. Each of those sons had a hundred sons. In this way, Puranjana's lineage increased in the land of Panchala. He became attached to material objects and had a strong sense of 'mine'. They

ended up destroying his riches. He was attached to his home, his riches and those who lived on them.

There was a king of the *gandharvas* and his name was Chandavega. This powerful one had an army consisting of three hundred and sixty *gandharvas*. There were a similar number of *gandharva* women with them. Some were dark and some were fair. (This entire story is an allegory. The *gandharvas* stand for days. The *gandharva* women stand for nights, the fair ones for *shukla paksha*, the bright lunar fortnight, and the dark ones for *krishna paksha*, the dark lunar fortnight). Together, they surrounded the city and plundered everything. When Chandavega's followers started to plunder Puranjana's city, the large serpent tried to counter them. The powerful protector of Puranjana's city fought with the 720 *gandharvas* for one hundred years. However, Puranjana's friend was fighting single-handedly with many and his strength waned. At this, Puranjana's kingdom, city and relatives were afflicted and were filled with great anxiety. Kala had a daughter. (The daughter of Kala, or Time, is meant to signify old age.) Because of her misfortune, she was known in all the worlds as Durbhaga (the unfortunate one). Her husband was Bhaya (fear). Bhaya's soldiers were the agents of destiny. Bhaya and Kala attacked Puranjana's city. It was full of objects of pleasure and was guarded by the serpent who had turned old. With her force, Kala's daughter took over Puranjana's city. Whichever man was overpowered by her, instantly lost his powers. Unwillingly, the king decided to abandon the city. The time for separation from his wife arrived and he was miserable. He thought, 'When I leave for the next world, my wife will be without a protector. She will grieve over her children. How will she maintain herself? She does not eat until I have eaten. She does not bathe until I have bathed. She is devoted to me. If I am angry, she is extremely scared. When I reprimand her, she is silent. When I do not know, she advises me. When I am not around, she is filled with sorrow. She is the mother of brave sons. How will she sustain the status of a householder? My miserable sons and daughters are dependent on me. When I have left, how will they sustain themselves?' Bhaya approached and seized him. The serpent, which had also been obstructed, abandoned the city and departed. After this, the city was broken down and became one with nature.

Puranjani's thoughts had been fixed in his mind. Therefore, thereafter, he was born in Vidarbha in Rajasimha's house, as a beautiful woman. As the princess of Vidarbha, she married Malayadhvaja, the king of Pandya. In

due course, they had sons and daughters. Eventually, Malayadhvaja retired to the forest to perform austerities, accompanied by his wife, the princess. When Malayadhvaja died, she wept loudly. In this state of distress, she met Puranjana's friend Avijnata, who had been reborn as a brahmana. The brahmana asked, 'Who are you? Who do you belong to? You are grieving over the one who is lying down here. Who is he? Don't you recognize me as a friend with whom you used to wander around earlier? Can you remember your friend Avijnata? You wished to be attached to earthly pleasures. You abandoned me and went in search of that. O noble one! You and I were swans, two friends who resided in Lake Manasa. But for one thousand years, both of us have been separated from our original residences. O friend! Your mind turned to carnal pleasures. You left me and went to earth. While you were wandering around there, you saw a place that was constructed by a woman. There were five gardens, nine gates, one protector, three chambers, six families and five marketplaces. It was made of the five elements and a woman was the mistress. (The gardens are the objects of the five senses. The gates are the nine apertures for the senses. The three chambers are fire, water and earth. The families are the collections of the senses, six families for the five senses and the mind. The marketplaces are the organs of action, where beings transact according to their capacity and nature.) The man is truly the lord of all the powers. However, having entered there, he does not comprehend. You were touched by that lady. While you pleased with her, you forgot all your learning. Because of your association with her, you have been reduced to this wicked state. You are not the daughter of Vidarbha, nor is this brave one your husband. You are not Puranjani's husband. You have been confined by these nine gates. It is because of the *maya* (illusion) created by me that you think of yourself as a man or a virtuous woman. You are neither. Both of us are swans (as a metaphor for pure consciousness). Behold our true nature. I am you. Behold. You are no different from me. Those who are wise do not detect the slightest bit of difference between us. In a mirror, a man can use his eyes to see one or two. The difference between us is just like that.' In this way, he realized his own true nature. He regained his memory, lost because of the separation.

You will recall that the Puranjana's story was told by the sage Narada. Thus, Narada added some more explanation to make the allegory clear. Narada said, 'Know that the being Puranjana creates a city for himself—

with one leg, two legs, four legs, many legs or no legs (depending on the living being one is born as). The friend of the being, described as Avijnata, is his *atman*. Living beings cannot know him through names, acts or attributes. When a being desires to enjoy all the *gunas* of Prakriti, he accepts that nine gates, two hands and two feet is the most appropriate form. One should know the maiden as Buddhi (intellect), who creates the feeling of “I” and “mine”. With that presiding over the body, the being enjoys the qualities of the senses. The male friends are the senses, who ensure knowledge and action, while the female friends are their conduct. The serpent is *prana*, with its five kinds of flows. One should know the great commander as the mind, the leader of both types of senses. The Panchala kingdom is one where one enjoys the five objects of the senses. In its midst is the city with nine gates—the two eyes, the two nostrils, the two ears, the mouth, the genital organs and the anus. Some of them are in pairs. In association with the respective sense, the breath of life goes out through these. The eyes, the nostrils and the mouth are the five gates towards the east. The right ear is considered as the gate towards the south and the left ear as the gate towards the north. The anus and the genital organs are regarded as the two gates towards the west. In this way, though the *atman* is a witness, it is made to undertake different kinds of activities. The body is the chariot and the senses are the horses. Though one doesn’t actually move, the number of years is the span of life. Good and bad deeds are the two wheels. The three *gunas* constitute the standard. The five joints between the yoke and the pole are the five aspects of *prana*. The mind is the rein, intelligence is the charioteer, the heart is the seat and opposite sentiments are the two poles for the yoke. The five senses are the five kinds of weapons. The seven bumpers are the constituents of the body (*rasa* or plasma, *rakta* or blood, *mamsa* or flesh, *meda* or fat, *asthi* or bones, *majja* or nerve/marrow, and *shukra* or semen/reproductive tissue). Using the eleven types of soldiers of the senses (adding the mind to the five senses of perception and the five of action), a being rushes after a mirage. The passage of time is symbolized by the year, Chandavega. He commands the days, in the form of the male *gandharvas* and the nights in the form of the female *gandharvas*. There are three hundred and sixty of each and as they progress, they diminish the lifespan. The daughter of Kala is old age herself and no one welcomes her. In this way, destiny ensures that a being who is born suffers from many kinds of miseries for one hundred years. In the

body, the *jivatman* is enveloped in darkness. It is *nirguna*, but the attributes of *prana*, the senses and the mind are imposed on the *atman*. It lies in this bondage of desire and performs acts according to “I” and “mine”. Pursuing desire, a being travels on the superior path or the inferior path. Depending on destiny, he experiences pleasure or pain.’ I think this is a beautiful allegory. Before moving onto the next chapter, it is worth reading it again.

³²Huxley, Thomas. *Collected Essays, Volume 5: Science and the Christian Tradition*. First published in 1894, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

³³Russell, Bertrand. *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*. Routledge, 2009.

³⁴Chattopadhyaya, Debiprasad. *Lokayata: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism*. Peoples Publishing House, 1959.

³⁵*Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 1, 1893. Available at: http://ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_1/complete_works_v1_contents.htm. Last accessed on 12 June 2020.

THE *JIVATMAN* AND THE *PARAMATMAN*

In the previous chapter, there was a reference to ‘I’ and ‘mine’. I have already mentioned one of Adi Shankaracharya’s *stotrams*. I will start this chapter with verses from another one of Adi Shankaracharya’s *stotrams*. You must have heard it sung, chanted and recited several times. It is known as *nirvana-shatakam*. We already know what *nirvana* means. The *shatakam* means that the *stotram* has six verses. Since this is not from the Bhagavad Gita, I will not bother about the पदच्छेद and अन्वय. A simple translation will suffice.

मनोबुद्ध्यहङ्कार चित्तानि नाहं
न च श्रोत्रजिह्वे न च घ्राणनेत्रे।
न च व्योम भूमिर्न तेजो न वायुः
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहम् शिवोऽहम्॥ (1)

न च प्राणसंज्ञो न वै पञ्चवायुः
न वा सप्तधातुः न वा पञ्चकोशः।
न वाक्पाणिपादं न चोपस्थपायु
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहम् शिवोऽहम्॥ (2)

न मे द्वेषरागौ न मे लोभमोहौ
मदो नैव मे नैव मात्सर्यभावः।
न धर्मो न चार्थो न कामो न मोक्षः
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहम् शिवोऽहम्॥ (3)

न पुण्यं न पापं न सौख्यं न दुःखं
न मन्त्रो न तीर्थं न वेदा न यज्ञाः।
अहं भोजनं नैव भोज्यं न भोक्ता
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहम् शिवोऽहम्॥ (4)

न मृत्युर्न शङ्का न मे जातिभेदः
पिता नैव मे नैव माता न जन्मः।
न बन्धुर्न मित्रं गुरुर्नैव शिष्यं
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहम् शिवोऽहम्॥ (5)

अहं निर्विकल्पो निराकाररूपो
विभुत्वाच्च सर्वत्र सर्वेन्द्रियाणाम्।
न चासङ्गतं नैव मुक्तिर्न मेयः
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहम् शिवोऽहम्॥ (6)

‘I am not *manas* [mind], *buddhi* [intellect], *ahamkara* [ego] or *chitta* [the faculty of reasoning]. I am not the ears, the tongue, the nose or the eyes. I am not space, earth, fire or air. My form is that of blissful consciousness. I am Shiva. I am Shiva. I am not the five flows described as *prana*, the breath of life. I am not the seven ingredients of the body [fluids, blood, flesh, fat, marrow, bones, semen/ovum]. I am not the five sheaths that cover the body [made out of food, vital airs, the mind, *vijnana* and bliss]. I am not the organ of speech, the hands, the feet or the anus. My form is that of blissful consciousness. I am Shiva. I am Shiva. There is no hatred in me, nor any attachment. There is no avarice [*lobha*] in me, nor any delusion [*moha*]. There is no sense of insolence [*mada*] in me, nor sentiments of envy [*matsarya*]. I am not the pursuit of dharma, *artha*, *kama* or moksha. My form is that of blissful consciousness. I am Shiva. I am Shiva. I am not good deeds or bad deeds. I am not happiness or misery. Mantras, *tirthas*, the Vedas and sacrifices have no meaning for me. I am not food [anything that is enjoyed]. I am not what is eaten. I am not the one who eats. My form is

that of blissful consciousness. I am Shiva. I am Shiva. I do not face death or fear and am beyond the differences of jati. I have no father or mother. I have no birth. I have no relative, friend, guru or disciple. My form is that of blissful consciousness. I am Shiva. I am Shiva. I am beyond change. My form is that of one without form. My energy is present everywhere, in all the senses. I am not attached. I am not liberation nor the one who is liberated. My form is that of blissful consciousness. I am Shiva. I am Shiva.'

The implications are profound. The words *jnana* and *vijnana* are often used synonymously for knowledge, with no distinction being drawn between them. Today, most people will take the word *vijnana* to mean science. There is a distinction that is sometimes drawn between *jnana* and *vijnana*. *Jnana* is what you learn from the sacred texts, from your gurus. *Vijnana* is what you learn by yourself, through self-realization. When you read a shloka from the Bhagavad Gita, do remember that the Bhagavad Gita uses the word *atman* to mean both the *jivatman* and the *paramatman*. However, the context will make clear which meaning is intended. Self-realization is about understanding the *jivatman*, the *paramatman* and the relationship between the two. The word *adhyatma* means, that knowledge. Hinduism and the Bhagavad Gita are fundamentally empirical in nature. We already have a sense of what 'I' am not. The realization of what 'I' am, will only come about through self-realization, through *vijnana*. No amount of reading Adi Shankaracharya's *stotrams*, the Upanishads, or even the Bhagavad Gita, will actually get you there. If you remember the different kinds of proof I mentioned earlier, all this is *shabda*, the testimony of others.

3.20

कर्मणैव हि संसिद्धिमास्थिता जनकादयः।

लोकसंग्रहमेवापि संपश्यन्कर्तुमर्हसि॥

हि जनक-आदयः कर्मणा एव संसिद्धिम् आस्थिताः।

अपि लोक-संग्रहम् एव सम्पश्यन् कर्तुम् अर्हसि॥

‘Indeed, Janaka and the others obtained perfection through action alone. Considering this, to protect the worlds, you should also resort to action.’

In this shloka, Krishna exhorts Arjuna to undertake karma and not avoid it. But there is a reference to Janaka and the others. This means King Janaka. He ruled over the kingdom of Videha and Videha’s capital was Mithila. The moment we think about King Janaka, we think of Sita, from the Ramayana. Since she was Janaka’s daughter, from Videha and Mithila, her names are Janaki, Vaidehi and Maithili. However, Janaka is not a proper name. All the kings in that dynasty were known as Janaka. Therefore, the reference to it in 3.20 is, in all probability, not about Sita’s father. All the Janakas were virtuous kings and there is another such famous King Janaka, associated with the Ashtavakra Gita. When I listed various Gitas, I mentioned the Ashtavakra Gita. This isn’t part of any other text. It is an independent text in its own right. The sage Ashtavakra’s story is recounted in the Mahabharata.

The name comes from अष्ट (*ashta*), meaning eight, and वक्र (*vakra*), meaning crooked. There are references to Ashtavakra in various texts. The story of his deformity is narrated in the Mahabharata, in Vana/Aranyaka Parva. Ashtavakra’s father was Kahoda (or Kahola). His mother was Sujata. When this incident happened, Ashtavakra was still in Sujata’s womb. He hadn’t been born. Kahoda recited the Vedas and reminiscent of Abhimanyu in Subhadra’s womb (when Arjuna spoke about *chakravyuha*), Ashtavakra heard attentively. Getting the nuances of correct pronunciation is extremely important, especially where the Vedas are concerned. Kahoda couldn’t get it right. From inside the womb, Ashtavakra protested. There were eight such occasions and Ashtavakra protested eight times. Proud of his own learning, Kahoda cursed Ashtavakra that he would be born crooked in eight parts of his body. Most of us have heard of the expression साष्टङ्ग प्रणाम (*sashtanga pranama*), though we don’t always think about it. This means lying completely prostrate on the ground, with eight of one’s limbs actually touching the ground. Though the number eight is sometimes interpreted metaphorically, literally, it means two feet, two knees, two hands, the chest and the forehead. These must touch the ground. Ashtavakra was cursed in precisely those eight limbs. Those turned crooked and he was born crooked, with bent limbs. I have seen only one painting of Ashtavakra depicted in that crooked fashion. It is a reprint of an early nineteenth century water colour painting from Patna, but with the artist unknown. The original is in

the British Museum. There is another famous one by Ramabhadracharya, but in this, the crookedness isn't that obvious. Kahoda wasn't as learned as he took himself to be. He went to King Janaka's court and the resident scholar, Vandin/Bandin, defeated him in a debate and imprisoned him. When he was twelve years old, Ashtavakra travelled to Janaka's court to rescue his father. He did this by defeating Vandin in a debate. Subsequently, Ashtavakra bathed in the river Samanga and his deformity was cured. This river Samanga is now known as the Song, in the district of Dehradun. It is also known as Ashtavakra nadi. Ashtavakra's hermitage is believed to have been in the village of Raiwala, in the same district.

On a later occasion, not when he had a debate with Vandin/Bandin, Ashtavakra again went to visit King Janaka. Those teachings to King Janaka resulted in the Ashtavakra Gita, also known as the Ashtavakra Samhita. The Bhagavad Gita isn't the only Gita. There were other Gitas too and the Ashtavakra Gita is one of the most important among these. It is a dialogue between Janaka and Ashtavakra, with Janaka as the student and Ashtavakra as the teacher. With twenty chapters, it is an exposition of *Advaita Vedanta*. It is impossible to date the Ashtavakra Gita satisfactorily. Clearly, it was composed after the Bhagavad Gita. And by the way, the Ashtavakra Gita tells us absolutely nothing about Ashtavakra's personal life.

I will quote a little bit from the first chapter of the Ashtavakra Gita. This is from a translation by Swami Nityaswarupananda.³⁶ I will only quote from the main translation in English, without the Sanskrit, and without the notes. My intention is to convey the overall sense, not specific details.

Janaka asked, 'How can knowledge be acquired? How can liberation be attained? How is renunciation possible? Tell me this, O Lord.'

Ashtavakra replied, 'If you aspire after liberation, my child, shun the objects of the senses as poison and seek forgiveness, sincerity, kindness, contentment and truth as nectar. You are neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air, nor ether. In order to attain liberation, know the Self as the witness of all these and Consciousness itself. If you detach yourself from the body and rely on Intelligence, you will at once be happy, peaceful and free from bondage. You do not belong to the brahmana or any other caste or to any ashrama. You are not perceived by the eyes. Unattached, formless and witness of all are you. Be happy. Virtue and vice, and pleasure and pain are of the mind, not of you, O all-pervading one. You are neither a doer nor an

enjoyer. Verily, you are ever free. You are the one seer of all and really ever free. Verily, this alone is your bondage that you see the seer as other than such. Do you who have been bitten by the great black serpent of egoism ‘I am the doer’, drink the nectar of the faith ‘I am not the doer’, and be happy? Burn down the forest of ignorance with the fire of the conviction, ‘I am the One and Pure Intelligence’, and be free from grief and be happy. That Consciousness in which this universe appears being conceived like a snake in a rope, is Bliss—Supreme Bliss. You are that Consciousness. Be happy. One who considers oneself free is free indeed and one who considers himself bound remains bound. ‘As one thinks, so one becomes,’ is a popular saying in this world, which is too true. The Self is a witness, all-pervading, perfect, one, free, intelligence, actionless, unattached, desireless and quiet. Through illusion it appears as if of the world. Meditate on the *atman* as immovable, Intelligence and non-dual, having given up external and internal self-modifications and the illusion ‘I am the reflected self (individual soul). My child, you have long been in the noose of body-consciousness. Sever it with the sword of the knowledge “I am Intelligence” and be happy.’

‘One who considers oneself free is free indeed and one who considers himself bound remains bound.’ That’s a profound statement. How does one begin to unbind oneself and ascend up the ladder of *arohana*? I have already spoken about yoga and *dhyana*. Of course, it is difficult. There are no magic wands. One has to persevere. I presume you remember the difference between *shabda* (testimony of others) and *pratyaksha* (perception). The proposition about upliftment through *dhyana* and yoga isn’t only because of *shabda*, because of what others who have experienced it have told us, because of what the Bhagavad Gita tells us. It is *pratyaksha* too. If you practice it, you will visibly feel the difference.

6.35 and 6.36

श्रीभगवानुवाच

असंशयं महाबाहो मनो दुर्निग्रहं चलं।
अभ्यासेन तु कौन्तेय वैराग्येण च गृह्यते॥
महाबाहो मनः असंशयम् चलम् दुर्निग्रहम्
कौन्तेय तु अभ्यासेन वैराग्येण च गृह्यते॥
असंयतात्मना योगो दुष्प्राप इति मे मतिः।
वश्यात्मना तु यतता शक्योऽवाप्तुमुपायतः॥

असंयत-आत्मना योगः दुष्प्रापः वश्य-आत्मना यतता
तु उपायतः अवाप्तुम् शक्यः इति मे मतिः॥

The illustrious Bhagavan said, ‘O mighty-armed one! There is no doubt that the mind is restless and difficult to control. O Kaunteya [Arjuna]! However, through practice and non-attachment, it can be restrained. In my view, yoga is extremely difficult for a person who has not controlled his mind. But it is capable of being achieved by a person who has controlled his mind and makes efforts.’

There are steps in that ascendance. (1) Progressively getting rid of the six vices of *kama* (काम) or desire, *krodha* (क्रोध) or anger, *lobha* (लोभ) or avarice, *moha* (मोह) or delusion, *mada* (मद) or insolence and *matsarya* (मात्सर्य) or envy. Getting rid of the transient junk in the form of the senses and the objects of the senses. वैराग्य (*vairagya*) characterizes a person who has obtained the state of विराग (*viraga*). *Raga* means attached. Thus, *viraga* means non-attachment, indifferent, dispassionate. *Vairagya* is non-attachment.

Every once in a while, there will be an attempt to measure ‘happiness’. For example, there is a World Happiness Report that is published every year. This report is partly the result of a UN General Assembly resolution in 2011, asking countries to try and measure the happiness of their citizens and use those indicators to shape public policy. There is a lot of misinformation about Bhutan’s gross national happiness (GNH). GNH isn’t an alternative measure to gross domestic product (GDP). Instead, the Bhutanese government uses perceptions of well-being to determine public expenditure allocation (in rural areas). One should rightly be sceptical of perceptions of

well-being that masquerade as an attempt to measure and quantify the elusive attribute of happiness. (Within OECD, there have been attempts to measure subjective well-being.) There are also neuropsychologists like Rick Hanson, a Senior Fellow at the University of Berkeley. Several of his books are on happiness, from the neuroscience point of view.³⁷ Stripped to its essence, you hardwire happiness by encouraging positive feelings and discouraging negative ones. If I may say so, we have known that for years. If I may say so, the Bhagavad Gita tells us that. There is a Buddhist monk named Matthieu Ricard who lives in Nepal. He has been called the ‘happiest’ person in the world. In his case, neuroscientists from the University of Wisconsin plugged 256 sensors into his brain. This is what they found.³⁸ ‘The scans showed that when meditating on compassion, Ricard’s brain produces a level of gamma waves—those linked to consciousness, attention, learning and memory “never reported before in the neuroscience literature”, Davidson said. The scans also showed excessive activity in his brain’s left prefrontal cortex compared to its right counterpart, allowing him an abnormally large capacity for happiness and a reduced propensity towards negativity.’ The monk attributes his ‘success’ to meditation (15 minutes a day) and altruism. Altruism? It’s back to the quid pro quo idea, or its lack. You don’t do things because you expect something in return. Because you do things without expecting a direct quid pro quo, things are also done for you, without expecting a direct quid pro quo. Even from your limited and narrow perspective, being altruistic is better than being selfish. Because you exude positivity, you get positivity in return. If you exude negativity, you get negativity in return.

There are two separate words, सुख (*sukha*) and शान्ति (*shanti*). *Sukha* means happiness, *shanti* means peace/contentment. I have already said that we look for happiness in the wrong things. Getting rid of the junk means that we will find peace. Without *shanti*, how can there be true *sukha*?

2.66

नास्ति बुद्धिरयुक्तस्य न चायुक्तस्य भावना।
न चाभावयतः शान्तिरशान्तस्य कुतः सुखम्॥
अयुक्तस्य बुद्धिः न अस्ति अयुक्तस्य च भावना न
अभावयतः च शान्तिः न अशान्तस्य सुखम् कुतः॥

‘He who cannot concentrate, has no intellect. He who cannot concentrate, has no meditation. He who does not meditate has no peace. If a person does not have peace, how can he possess happiness?’

There is an additional point I want to make. The Isha Upanishad is a very short Upanishad, only seventeen or eighteen shlokas, depending on the version. Here is the first verse and I am sure you are familiar with the first half of the verse.

ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत्।
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथाः मा गृधः कस्यस्विद्धनम्॥

Here is Swami Nikhilananda’s translation. ‘All this—whatever exists in this changing universe—should be covered by the Lord. Protect the Self by renunciation. Lust not after any man’s wealth.’³⁹ Here is Sri Aurobindo’s: ‘All this is for habitation by the lord, whatsoever is individual universe of movement in the universal motion. By that renounced thou shouldst enjoy; lust not after any man’s possession.’⁴⁰ Ignore the first line and focus on the तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथाः bit in the second line. The key is the word त्यक्त and what it refers to. Most *sannyasa*-driven translations will focus on renouncing or glossing over the भुञ्जीथाः bit. I think Sri Aurobindo is absolutely right. Enjoy—with non-attachment. That’s exactly what the Bhagavad Gita says.

I have spoken about the first step, getting rid of the junk, the senses and the objects of the senses. That will eliminate the clutter of मम or ‘mine’. The next step up the ladder, a much more difficult one, is to get rid of अहम् or ‘I’. One needs to eliminate अहङ्कार (*ahamkara*)—ego, pride, self-conceit, arrogance. That translation, and there is no better, hasn’t captured the nuance of *ahamkara* entirely. The verbal root suggests, ‘I am doing’. I am the agent. I will come back to *ahamkara* in a subsequent chapter. But do notice that in Sanskrit and other Indian languages, the equivalent word for ‘I’ is not spelt with a capital letter. In many European languages, ‘I’ is spelt

with a capital letter. Language is important. Language is linked to culture. Language shapes culture and attitudes.

The third step is to realize the nature of the *jivatman*. The Bhagavad Gita (and other texts) use the term *kshetra* for the physical body. *Kshetra* means field and there is the image of a field being ploughed. *Kshetrjna* (the one who knows the field) is used as a term for the *jivatman*.

13.2

श्री भगवानुवाच

इदं शरीरं कौन्तेय क्षेत्रमित्यभिधीयते।
एतद्यो वेत्ति तं प्राहुः क्षेत्रज्ञ इति तद्विदः॥
कौन्तेय इदम् शरीरम् क्षेत्रम् इति अभिधीयते।
यः एतत् वेत्ति तम् क्षेत्रज्ञः इति तत्-विदः प्राहुः॥

The illustrious Bhagavan said, ‘O Kaunteya [Arjuna]! This body is known as the *kshetra* [field]. Those are learned speak of the one who knows this as *kshetrjna* [the one who knows the field, the *jivatman*].’

13.6 and 13.7

महाभूतान्यहङ्कारो बुद्धिरव्यक्तमेव च।
इन्द्रियाणि दशैकं च पञ्च चेन्द्रियगोचराः॥
इच्छा द्वेषः सुखं दुःखं सङ्घातश्चेतनाधृतिः।
एतत्क्षेत्रं समासेन सविकारमुदाहृतम्॥
महा-भूतानि अहङ्कारः बुद्धिः अव्यक्तम् एव च
दश इन्द्रियाणि च एकम् इन्द्रिय-गोचराः पञ्च च
इच्छा द्वेषः सुखम् दुःखम् संघातः चेतना धृतिः
एतत् सविकारम् क्षेत्रम् समासेन उदाहृतम्॥

‘The great elements [earth, air, fire, water, space], *ahamkara* [ego], intellect, the one who is not manifest [Prakriti], the ten organs of perception and action, the single one [the mind], the five objects of the senses, desire, hatred, happiness, unhappiness, the aggregate of these, consciousness, fortitude—all these and their transformations are the *kshetra*. This has been stated briefly.’

6.5 to 6.6

उद्धरेदात्मनाऽऽत्मानं नात्मानमवसादयेत्।
आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बन्धुरात्मैव रिपुरात्मनः॥
आत्मना आत्मानम् उद्धरेत् आत्मानम् न अवसादयेत्।
आत्मा एव हि आत्मनः बन्धुः आत्मा एव आत्मनः रिपुः॥
बन्धुरात्माऽऽत्मनस्तस्य येनात्मैवात्मना जितः।
अनात्मनस्तु शत्रुत्वे वर्तेतात्मैव शत्रुवत्॥
येन आत्मना एव आत्मा जितः तस्य आत्मनः बन्धुः आत्मा
अनात्मनः तु शत्रुत्वे आत्मा एव शत्रुवत् वर्तेत॥

‘Use one’s own self to uplift one’s own self. One should not let one’s own self sink. One’s own self is one’s friend. One’s own self is one’s enemy. If one has used one’s own self to conquer one’s own self, then one’s own self is a friend. If one has failed to conquer one’s own self, then one’s own self acts like an enemy.’

6.19 to 6.20

यथा दीपो निवातस्थो नेङ्गते सोपमा स्मृता।
 योगिनो यतचित्तस्य युञ्जतो योगमात्मनः॥
 यथा निवातस्थः दीपः न इङ्गते सा उपमा स्मृता
 आत्मनः योगम् युञ्जतः यत-चित्तस्य योगिनः॥
 यत्रोपरमते चित्तं निरुद्धं योगसेवया।
 यत्र चौवात्मनाऽऽत्मानं पश्यन्नात्मनि तुष्यति॥
 यत्र उपरमते चित्तम् निरुद्धम् योग-सेवया।
 यत्र च एव आत्मना आत्मानम् पश्यन् आत्मनि तुष्यति॥
 सुखमात्यन्तिकं यत्तद्बुद्धिग्राह्यमतीन्द्रियम्।
 वेत्ति यत्र न चौवायं स्थितश्चलति तत्त्वतः॥
 सुखम् आत्यन्तिकम् यत् तत् बुद्धि-ग्राह्यम्-अतीन्द्रियम्।
 वेत्ति यत्र न च एव अयम् स्थितः चलति तत्त्वतः॥

‘Like a lamp does not flicker in a place where there is no wind. This is said to be the simile for a yogi who has controlled his mind and is engaged in yoga. When the mind is quietened and restrained through the practice of yoga, one uses one’s own self to see the *atman* is one’s own self and is content. One feels the extreme bliss that is realized by the intellect, but is beyond the grasp of the senses. Established in that reality, one no longer deviates from that state.’

I am going to give you a bit from Swami Nikhilananda’s translation of the Katha Upanishad. ‘Know the *atman* to be the master of the chariot; the body, chariot; the intellect, the charioteer; and the mind, the reins... The senses, they say, are the horses; the objects, the roads. The wise call the *atman*—united with the body, the senses and the mind—the enjoyer... If the *buddhi*, being related to a mind that is always distracted, loses its discriminations, then the senses become uncontrolled, like the vicious horses of a charioteer... But if the *buddhi*, being related to a mind that is always restrained, possesses discrimination, then the senses come under control, like the good horses of a charioteer.’⁴¹

The film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, used to be a rage once. Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke wrote the screenplay and after the film was released, Arthur C. Clarke wrote a book with the same title.⁴² (There was a short story by Arthur C. Clarke that inspired the film, but I have the novel in mind.) In both the film and the book, there is a character named Moon-Watcher. He was a leader of the man-apes. Moon-Watcher features prominently in the film too, but there is a quote that you will only find in the book. ‘Of all the creatures who had yet walked on Earth, the man-apes were the first to look steadfastly at the Moon. And though he could not remember it, when he was very young, Moon-Watcher would sometimes reach out and try to touch that ghostly face rising above the hills. He had never succeeded, and now he was old enough to understand why. For first, of course, he must find a high-enough tree to climb.’ That quote, about Moon-Watcher finding a high enough tree to touch the moon has never left me.

In 1884, a school-teacher named Edwin Abbott published a book titled, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*.⁴³ This was social satire and Flatland was a two-dimensional world. Women were straight lines. Men were polygons and their position in the social hierarchy determined how many sides the polygon possessed. A Sphere arrives in this two-dimensional world. There is a Square in this two-dimensional world and encountering the Sphere, he refuses to believe there is a world of three dimensions. The Square becomes the Sphere’s student. Having studied from his teacher, the Square argues that, logically, there must be a four-dimensional world, a five-dimensional world and so on. Since the Sphere cannot comprehend a world of more than three-dimensions, he disowns his erstwhile student. I have mentioned *shabda* and I have mentioned *pratyaksha*. *Pratyaksha* is perception. Mount Everest is the tallest mountain on earth. The acceleration due to gravity is 32 feet per second. Most of us (I don’t know about all) believe in such propositions. Are they based on our direct perception? No, they are based on *shabda*. Let’s not accept that everything we believe in is based on *pratyaksha*. You will instantly produce a counter-argument. True, such propositions are based on *shabda*. But should we so wish, we can subject them to the *pratyaksha* test. We can replicate the Radhanath Sikdar and Galileo/Newton experiments. Indeed, the metaphysical/spiritual is also about the empirical. Swami Vivekananda

wrote/said this several times. Here is one quote from the monograph *Raja Yoga*.⁴⁴

All our knowledge is based upon experience. What we call inferential knowledge, in which we go from the less to the more general, or from the general to the particular, has experience as its basis. In what are called the exact sciences, people easily find the truth, because it appeals to the particular experiences of every human being... The Christian asks you to believe in his religion, to believe in Christ and to believe in him as the incarnation of God, to believe in a God, in a soul, and in a better state of that soul. If I ask him for reason, he says he believes in them. But if you go to the fountain-head of Christianity, you will find that it is based upon experience. Christ said he saw God, the disciples said they felt God, and so forth. Similarly, in Buddhism, it is Buddha's experience. He experienced certain truths, saw them, came in contact with them and preached them to the world. So with the Hindus. In their books the writers who are called Rishis, or sages, declare they experienced certain truths, and these they preach. Thus it is clear that all the religions of the world have been built upon that one universal and adamant foundation of all our knowledge—direct experience.

What is *pratyaksha*, in the sense we usually understand it, based on? That direct perception is based on the five senses—hearing, sight, touch, smell and taste. And we place an inordinate amount of unwarranted trust on sight. Moon-Watcher, the Sphere, the Square, all erred because they trusted sight. Richard Dawkins is a contemporary writer, who is against religion. In a book on evolution, titled, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, he refers to the Gorilla experiment.⁴⁵ This was conducted in 1999 by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simmons and I might as well quote from the book they wrote—*The Invisible Gorilla*.⁴⁶ The subtitle of this book, *And Other Ways Our Intuitions Deceive Us*, is just as important. ‘With our students as actors and a temporarily vacant floor of the psychology building as a set, we made a short film of two teams of people moving around and passing basketballs. One team wore white shirts and the other wore black. Volunteers were sought next. They (the students) asked volunteers to silently count the number of passes made by the players wearing white while ignoring any passes by the players wearing black. The video lasted less than a minute... Immediately after the video ended, our students asked the subjects to report how many passes they'd counted... The pass-counting task was intended to keep people engaged in doing something that demanded attention to the action on the screen, but we weren't really interested in pass-counting ability. We were actually testing something else: Halfway through the video, a female student wearing a full-length gorilla suit walked into the scene, stopped in the middle of the players, faced the camera, thumped her chest, and then walked off, spending about nine seconds on-screen.’ The

point is that none of the volunteers noticed the gorilla, the point of the experiment. There is a familiar expression, 'Seeing is believing,' and Dawkins uses the gorilla experiment to highlight that you should not trust your eyes. We should certainly not trust our eyes. Magic/sorcery has a hoary origin and is associated with the supernatural/paranormal. Forget that kind of magic and think of entertainment magic, performed on stage or on streets. This is the world of magic tricks, illusions and deceptions. All of them thrive on our blind faith in our eyes and use misdirection. Think of the world of optical illusions. Think of evidence rendered by witnesses in criminal trials, ones that break down under cross-examination. Think of deductions based on sight. 'The sky is blue.' That's a deduction based on sight. But strictly speaking, and I am being pedantic, it is a fallacious deduction. This is because of the Raman Effect, the scattering of light. The blue has been scattered away. Stated somewhat imprecisely, the sky is every colour but blue. The print in this book is not black. It seems black because all the light has been absorbed. If you are reading this on a computer screen, the screen isn't in the shape of a rectangle. It is a rectangle only when it is seen from a certain angle, not otherwise. Had we blindly trusted our eyes, we wouldn't have believed in infra-red and ultra-violet. I have abused sight, but that same point can be made about all the five senses. Many birds and animals possess senses that are keener than those of humans. For many birds and animals, I am not even sure that we can straitjacket them in those standard five senses. What about perceptions based on electrical and magnetic fields or water pressure and currents? Sensibility will be better served if we are sensible enough to accept that there is a world beyond the human sensory organs.

Yet, we want the *jivatman* to appear before us within a halo, exuding light, so that we can see it with our eyes. When I was a student in Britain in the late 1970s, I participated as a volunteer in an experiment. I wasn't particularly interested in the experiment. But students are hard-pressed for money, even if they are on scholarships. We, as volunteers, got paid for our efforts. There wasn't a great deal of effort. There was a professor and he had the equivalent of what in the US is called tenure. Once you had tenure, you could do pretty much what you wanted, no questions asked. So this physics professor made us sleep and strapped all kind of gadgets on us while we slept. The hypothesis was that while you slept, the *jivatman* left the body and roamed around. *Kshetrajna* wanted an out-of-body

experience, away from the *kshetra*. If the *jivatman* indeed left the body, there should be measurable changes in the physical body. We got paid for our efforts and he found no such evidence. I have no idea what was the outcome of the experiment. Perhaps he wrote a neat academic paper. You can't measure the *jivatman* in this way.

2.29

आश्चर्यवत्पश्यति कश्चिदेनमाश्चर्यवद्ब्रूदति तथैव चान्यः।

आश्चर्यवच्चैनमन्यः शृणोति श्रुत्वाप्येनं वेद न चैव कश्चित्॥

कश्चित् एनम् आश्चर्यवत् पश्यति तथा एव च अन्यः एनम् आश्चर्यवत् वदति।
अन्यः च एनम् आश्चर्यवत् शृणोति श्रुत्वा अपि च कश्चित् एव न वेद॥

‘Some people see this [the *atman*] as a wonder. Likewise, others speak of it as a wonder. There are others who hear of it as a wonder. But even after hearing about it, no one knows it.’

In connection with the Bhagavad Gita, I have often heard a question being asked. The stage is set for the battle of Kurukshetra. The two armies are arrayed on both sides. Suddenly, Arjuna decides not to fight. The Bhagavad Gita follows, while the Kaurava and the Pandava armies wait. What did the Kaurava and the Pandava armies do while the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna was taking place? If you recite the Bhagavad Gita, depending on your speed, it will take you something like one and a half hours. What did those two armies do during that time? This seems to be a pertinent question to ask, but I find it both irrelevant and silly. There are two kinds of responses possible. First, let's say the Kurukshetra War took place around 1400 BCE and let's say Sauti composed the Bhagavad Gita around the fifth century BCE. The precise years don't matter, but there is a time gap of one thousand years, the Yardi kind of proposition. In that case, Sauti was stating Krishna's teachings as he understood them. The question of the armies waiting does not arise. The second kind of response is more profound. We have a Newtonian perception about physics and its laws, as if we live in a deterministic world. That partly comes about because of the arrogance associated with technology. Through technology, we created death. Through technology, we are about to create life. We are about to become God. The world of physics, unlike technology, has become more

and more uncertain. The laws of gravitation don't apply in the cosmic world. There are other laws for the quantum world. Remember that propositions can't be proved in science. They can only be falsified. There are plenty of stated laws on science, professed as the truth, which have subsequently been falsified. Perhaps because we like certainty, our mindsets haven't adjusted to this uncertain world. There are several physicists who have been attracted to the Bhagavad Gita—Erwin Schrödinger, Werner Heisenberg, Robert Oppenheimer, Niels Bohr, Carl Sagan and Nikola Tesla. There could be other names I might have missed. The linearity of time, with effect following cause, is uncertain, since time itself has become relative. Scientists may dismiss para-psychology as pseudo-science, but some extra sensory perception (ESP) research cannot be dismissed as fraud, nor can it be dismissed on methodological grounds. I think there is reason to ponder before asking that question about the one and a half hours.

6.28

युञ्जन्नेवं सदाऽऽत्मानं योगी विगतकल्मषः।
सुखेन ब्रह्मसंस्पर्शमत्यन्तं सुखमश्नुते॥
एवम् सदा आत्मानम् युञ्जन् योगी विगत-कल्मषः
ब्रह्म-संस्पर्शम् अत्यन्तम् सुखम् सुखेन अश्नुते॥

‘In this way, uniting himself in yoga, the yogi is freed from all sins. In contact with the brahman, he experiences intense bliss.’

I have mentioned three steps so far: (1) Getting rid of the vices and establishing non-attachment. (2) Getting rid of *ahamkara*. (3) Realizing the *jivatman*. There is a fourth: (4) Realizing the union between the *jivatman* and the brahman and, therefore, realizing that the brahman is in all beings. I shouldn't say—in all beings. The brahman is in everything, animate and inanimate. I repeat, not just in living beings, in everything. I don't mean to suggest these four steps are neat silos, water-tight compartments. It is a continuum, ascending upwards, your path to *arohona*.

5.24

योऽन्तःसुखोऽन्तरारामस्तथान्तर्ज्योतिरेव यः।
स योगी ब्रह्मनिर्वाणं ब्रह्मभूतोऽधिगच्छति॥
यः अन्तः-सुखः अन्तर-आरामः तथा यः अन्तर्-ज्योतिः एव
सः योगी ब्रह्म-भूतः ब्रह्म-निर्वाणम् अधिगच्छति॥

‘He whose happiness is inside, he whose delight is inside, he whose illumination is inside—that yogi alone becomes one with the brahman. He finds *nirvana* in the brahman.’

6.9

सुहृन्मित्रार्युदासीनमध्यस्थद्वेष्यबन्धुषु।
साधुष्वपि च पापेषु समबुद्धिर्विशिष्यते॥
सुहृत् मित्र-अरि-उदासीन-मध्यस्थ-द्वेष्य-बन्धुषु
साधुषु अपि च पापेषु सम-बुद्धिः विशिष्यते॥

‘If a person’s intelligence is such that he is impartial towards a well-wisher, a friend, an enemy, a neutral, an arbiter, someone who hates, a relative, a virtuous person and a wicked person, he is superior.’

6.29

सर्वभूतस्थमात्मानं सर्वभूतानि चात्मनि।
ईक्षते योगयुक्तात्मा सर्वत्र समदर्शनः॥
योग-युक्त-आत्मा सर्वत्र सम-दर्शनः आत्मानम्
सर्व-भूतस्थम् सर्व-भूतानि च आत्मनि ईक्षते॥

‘Immersed in yoga, he looks towards everything with impartial vision. He sees his *atman* in all beings and all beings in his *atman*.’

However, there is a problem. I once heard a talk by Stephen Hawking. Most of it went over my head, but a little registered. Pick up any textbook on any subject, if you are reasonably intelligent, you will make sense of the

first few pages. After that, unless you specialize in that particular subject, you will be lost. Everything depends on perseverance and effort. The success or failure of any message depends on the transmitter, as well as the receiver. Among thousands who try, only a few reach that final step of *arohana*.

7.3

मनुष्याणां सहस्रेषु कश्चिद्यतति सिद्धये।
यततामपि सिद्धानां कश्चिन्मां वेत्ति तत्त्वतः॥
मनुष्याणाम् सहस्रेषु कश्चित् सिद्धये यतति
यतताम् सिद्धानाम् अपि कश्चित् माम् तत्त्वतः वेत्ति॥

‘Among thousands of humans, perhaps one strives for perfection. Among those who strive for perfection, perhaps one gets to know about my true nature.’

There is *shabda*. There are accounts of people who have ascended the ladder. They can’t all be frauds, even if most of them are. Notice that most people who have ascended the ladder have not described what they experienced—not Buddha, not Jesus Christ, not Prophet Muhammad. Their followers have sometimes sought to describe what they experienced, but not they themselves. Among those who have described something, I can only think of Sri Aurobindo, Paramahansa Yogananda, Jiddu Krishnamurti and U.G. Krishnamurti. Perhaps what was experienced cannot be stated in words. Do remember what I said earlier, about those two different words used for sages—*rishi* and *muni*. Rishis not only got married and had children, they also taught. Munis were silent. There must be several who ascended the ladder. But they were munis; they had no particular desire to disclose anything to society. Shyama Charan Lahiri (1828–1895), better known as Lahiri Mahasaya, is an example of this. Had it not been for Paramahansa Yogananda, how many people would have heard of Lahiri Mahasaya? Only those who have become teachers have at times disclosed what they experienced. But this isn’t only *shabda*, it is *pratayksha* too, with the qualification that what you experience depends on your receptivity, on how ready you are. There is a word known as साधना (*sadhana*). It is

difficult to translate this into English. The word not only means effort, it also means accomplishment. I will talk about the cycle of birth and death in the next chapter. The *sadhana*, interpreted as accomplishment—how far up the ladder you have moved—depends not only on what you do in this birth, but also on what you have accumulated across successive births.

7.19

बहूनां जन्मनामन्ते ज्ञानवान्मां प्रपद्यते।
वासुदेवः सर्वमिति स महात्मा सुदुर्लभः॥
ज्ञानवान् बहूनाम् जन्मनाम् अन्ते वासुदेवः
सर्वम् इति माम् प्रपद्यते सः महात्मा सुदुर्लभः॥

‘After many births, a person obtains the jnana and attains me, knowing that Vaasudeva is everything. But such a great-souled person is extremely rare.’

6.43 to 6.45

तत्र तं बुद्धिसंयोगं लभते पौर्वदेहिकम्।
यतते च ततो भूयः संसिद्धौ कुरुनन्दन॥
कुरुनन्दन तत्र तम् पौर्व-देहिकम् बुद्धि-संयोगम्।
लभते ततः च भूयः संसिद्धौ यतते॥
पूर्वाभ्यासेन तेनैव हियते ह्यवशोऽपि सः।
जिज्ञासुरपि योगस्य शब्दब्रह्मातिवर्तते॥
तेन एव पूर्व-अभ्यासेन सः अवशः अपि हियते
हि योगस्य जिज्ञासुः अपि शब्द-ब्रह्म अतिवर्तते॥
प्रयत्नाद्यतमानस्तु योगी संशुद्धकिल्बिषः।
अनेकजन्मसंसिद्धस्ततो याति परां गतिम्॥
ततः प्रयत्नात् यतमानः संशुद्ध-किल्बिषः योगी तु
अनेक-जन्म-संसिद्धः पराम् गतिम् याति॥

‘O descendant of the Kuru lineage! He regains the intelligence that he possessed in his earlier body. Therefore, so as to be successful, he strives yet again. Because of that earlier practice, he is almost helplessly carried forward. He seeks yoga and goes beyond *shabda-brahma* [interpreted as the ritual elements of the Vedas]. Striving hard, the yogi is purified of his sins. Purified across many births, he achieves the supreme objective.’

8.6

यं यं वापि स्मरन्भावं त्यजत्यन्ते कलेवरम्।
तं तमेवैति कौन्तेय सदा तद्भावभावितः॥
यम् यम् वा अपि भावम् स्मरन् अन्ते कलेवरम् त्यजति
कौन्तेय सदा तद् भाव-भावितः तम् तम् एव एति॥

‘O Kaunteya! At the end, at the time of leaving the body, whatever thought a person constantly remembers, it is that thought and that state that he attains.’

I once met a *sannyasi*. He told me a concocted story. It is concocted, so take it as no more than that. He was making a point, through his concocted story.

The divine rishi, Narada, went to Goloka where Vishnu/Krishna resides. The Mahabharata describes an incident, where, along the banks of the Yamuna, Krishna and Arjuna enjoyed themselves along with their wives. Radha wasn’t present at the time. Narada, who has a mischievous trait of fomenting dissension and conflict, thought he would provoke Radha. ‘O Radha! You weren’t present at the time. Please ask Krishna to go down to earth and re-enact it, with you present. I will be delighted at being able to witness your sport.’ Krishna agreed. Balarama, Krishna and Arjuna went down to earth, along with Rohini, Radha, Draupadi and Subhadra. They ate and they drank. They killed wild boars and ate their flesh. However, mere mortals couldn’t see all this. At that time, a *vaishnava* named Harekrishna was on his way from Mathura to Vrindavana. His followers were with him. He chanted, ‘Hare Krishna! Hare Krishna! Krishna, Krishna, Hare Hare. Hare Rama! Hare Rama! Rama, Rama, Hare Hare.’ He played on his cymbals and chanted *kirtanas* as he went along. Hearing all this, Radha took pity on Harekrishna and told Krishna, ‘Since you have come down to

earth, why don't you show yourself to this devotee?' A messenger was sent to summon Harekrishna and his followers. They came and saw that gathering. Since guests had arrived, Balarama offered them a pot. Thinking it was milk, Harekrishna started to drink and immediately spat it out, since it was liquor. Radha and Draupadi offered them some food, meat of deer and boars that had been cooked. Harekrishna shuddered and started to run away. As he and his followers were running away, they met Bhima, returning from a hunt, with some deer and boar carcasses slung from his shoulder. Harekrishna thought his day had been ruined by these barbarians. 'What is this?' Radha asked Krishna. Krishna replied, 'Everyone acts according to his/her own intelligence, nature and inclinations. Even if they see me, and us, they won't necessarily be able to recognize us.' The *sannyasi*'s story was much more detailed. I have given you the bare bones. But you must have got the drift.

Even Arjuna had problems recognizing Krishna for what he was.

11.41 and 11.42

सखेति मत्वा प्रसभं यदुक्तं हे कृष्ण हे यादव हे सखेति।
 अजानता महिमानं तवेदं मया प्रमादात्प्रणयेन वापि॥
 यच्चावहासार्थमसत्कृतोऽसि विहारशय्यासनभोजनेषु।
 एकोऽथवाप्यच्युत तत्समक्षं तत्क्षामये त्वामहमप्रमेयम्॥
 तव इदम् महिमानम् अजानता मया सखा इति मत्वा

हे कृष्ण हे यादव हे सखा इति प्रमादात् प्रणयेन वा अपि
 प्रसभम् यत् उक्तम् हे अच्युत यत् च विहार-शय्या-आसन-भोजनेषु
 अवहासार्थम् एकः अथवा तत् समक्षम् अपि असत् कृतः असि
 तत् अहम् अप्रमेयम् त्वाम् क्षामये॥

'O Achyuta! Without knowing your glory and this [the universal form], inadvertently and in affection, thinking of you as a friend, I have rashly used expressions like "O Krishna! O Yadava! O friend!" to address you. At times of sport, sleeping, sitting or eating, alone or in front of others, I have shown you disrespect. O incomprehensible one! Please pardon me for that.'

7.25

नाहं प्रकाशः सर्वस्य योगमायासमावृतः।
मूढोऽयं नाभिजानाति लोको मामजमव्ययम्॥
योग-माया-समावृतः अहम् सर्वस्य प्रकाशः न।
अयम् मूढः लोकः अजम् अव्ययम् माम् न अभिजानाति॥

‘Shrouded in my powers of yoga and *maya*, I am not manifest before everyone. I am without birth and without decay. But the foolish world does not know me.’



³⁶Swami Nityaswarupananda, *Ashtavakra Samihita: Text with Word-for-word Translation, English Rendering and Comments*. Swami Ashrama, 1940. Advaita Ashrama has published many subsequent reprints of the 1940 edition. The original edition is available at: <https://ia801605.us.archive.org/15/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.490169/2015.490169.Ashtavakra-Samhita.pdf>. Last accessed on 12 June 2020. If you are going to get a different edition, make sure it is an edition with the commentary. Those notes are extensive and detailed, necessary to understand the text.

³⁷Try these books by Rick Hanson—*Buddha’s Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love and Wisdom*, New Harbinger Publications, 2009; *Just One Thing: Developing a Buddha Brain One Simple Practice at a Time*, New Harbinger Publications, 2011; and *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence*, Rider, 2013.

³⁸Available at: <http://www.simplecapacity.com/2015/05/brain-scans-reveal-the-world-happiest-man/>. Last accessed on 7 June 2020.

³⁹Swami Nikhilananda, *The Upanishads, Katha, Isa, Kena and Mundaka*, Vol. 1. Harper and Brothers, 1949.

⁴⁰*Isha Upanishad*, Vol. 17 in *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2003.

⁴¹Swami Nikhilananda. *The Upanishads, Katha, Isa, Kena and Mundaka*, Vol. 1. Harper and Brothers, 1949.

⁴²Clarke, Arthur C. *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Hutchinson, 1968.

⁴³Available at: <https://archive.org/details/flatlandromanceo00abbouoft/page/n6/mode/2up>. Last accessed on 12 June 2020.

⁴⁴Volume 1 of the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama. Available at: <https://advaitaashrama.org/cw/content.php>. Last accessed on 12 June 2020.

⁴⁵Dawkins, Richard. *The Greatest Show on Earth*. Free Press, Transworld, 2009.

⁴⁶Chabris, Christopher and Simons, Daniel. *The Invisible Gorilla: And Other Ways Our Intuitions Deceive Us*. Harmony, 2011.

BIRTH, DEATH, *SAMSARA* AND KARMA

There is a cycle of birth and death, the cycle of *samsara*, the wheel of life. Most of us are stuck in *samsara*, we are not ready for moksha. Therefore, we are born. We die. We are born again. The word karma has multiple meanings. What I am doing in this life is karma. The accumulation of what I have done in earlier lives is also karma. There are good deeds and there are bad deeds. It is a balance sheet. The good deeds are credit entries, the bad deeds are debit entries. Depending on my past karma, I may be born as human. I may be born as a lower life form. I may be born as something immobile. I may be born as a superior life form. I have heard snide comments like, ‘Am I going to be born as a cockroach?’ It is best not to be snide about cockroaches. They have been around for longer than humans.

This cycle of *samsara* is a core tenet of Hinduism and is a critical element in what the Bhagavad Gita says. The *jivatman* does not die. Death does not come as an end. It marks a new beginning. There is nothing to grieve about death. From the day we are born, we start to die. If death is to be grieved over, every morning, why do you say, ‘Good morning’ and greet someone? There has been one more sunrise. One more day has passed. You are one day closer to death. If death is to be grieved over, why do you celebrate your birthday? One more year has passed. You are one year closer to death. Note that belief in rebirth existed in many cultures. In the case of Christianity, such references were consciously removed in the sixth century CE.

There is a story about a *yaksha* in the Mahabharata. Wandering around during their period of exile in the forest, the Pandavas were thirsty. Nakula was sent off in search of some water. He came to a lake. There was no one there except a *yaksha* in the form of a *baka* (the Indian crane). The crane

warned Nakula, ‘Answer my questions first. If you don’t answer my questions and try to drink this water, you will fall down dead.’ It was just a crane. Therefore, Nakula ignored what it said and fell down dead. Sahadeva, Arjuna and Bhima followed, with the same result. It was Yudhishtira’s turn now. Yudhishtira successfully answered the crane’s questions. These questions are known as *yaksha prashna* (questions asked by a *yaksha*). The questions aren’t exactly numbered. Therefore, if someone says, the *yaksha* asked eighteen questions, that’s not quite correct. The answer depends on how you number the questions. Anyway, one of the questions asked was, ‘What is the greatest wonder?’ Yudhishtira answered, ‘Day after day, living beings go to Yama’s abode. Yet, those who remain, desire to live forever. What can be a greater wonder than that?’ Some of the oft-quoted shlokas from the Bhagavad Gita are about the *jivatman* not dying, but moving on from one body to another.

2.18

अन्तवन्त इमे देहा नित्यस्योक्ताः शरीरिणः।
अनाशिनोऽप्रमेयस्य तस्माद्युध्यस्व भारत॥
अन्तवन्तः इमे देहाः नित्यस्य उक्ताः शरीरिणः।
अनाशिनः अप्रमेयस्य तस्मात् युध्यस्व भारत॥

‘It is said that the bodies occupied by the *jivatman* [the one who occupies the body] are destroyed. But the *jivatman* is eternal and indestructible. It cannot be measured. O Bharata [Arjuna]! Therefore, fight.’

2.30

देही नित्यमवध्योऽयं देहे सर्वस्य भारत।
तस्मात्सर्वाणि भूतानि न त्वं शोचितुमर्हसि॥
भारत सर्वस्य देहे अयम् देही नित्यम् अवध्यः
तस्मात् त्वम् सर्वाणि भूतानि शोचितुम् न अर्हसि॥

‘O Bharata [Arjuna]! In all bodies, the *jivatman* [the one who occupies the body] is eternal and cannot be killed. Therefore, you should sorrow over any being.’

2.20

न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचिन्नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः।
अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे॥
अयम् कदाचित् न जायते न वा म्रियते भूत्वा भूयः अभविता वा न।
अयम् अजः नित्यः शाश्वतः पुराणः शरीरे हन्यमाने न हन्यते॥

‘This [the *jivatman*] is never born. Nor does it ever die. This has not come into existence. Nor will it cease to be. This is eternal. It has no birth. It is everlasting and is without destruction. When the body is killed. It is not killed.’

2.22

वासांसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि।
तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णान्यन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही॥
यथा नरः जीर्णानि वासांसि विहाय अपराणि नवानि गृह्णाति
तथा देही जीर्णानि शरीराणि विहाय अन्यानि नवानि संयाति॥

‘Just as a person discards worn-out clothes and accepts ones that are new, the *jivatman* [the one occupying the body] discards worn-out bodies and enters those that are new.’

2.28

अव्यक्तादीनि भूतानि व्यक्तमध्यानि भारत।
अव्यक्तनिधनान्येव तत्र का परिदेवना॥
भारत भूतानि अव्यक्त-आदीनि व्यक्त-मध्यानि
अव्यक्त-निधनानि एव तत्र परिदेवना का॥

‘O Bharata [Arjuna]! Beings are not manifest in the beginning [before birth]. They are manifest in the middle. After death, they are not manifest again. What is there to grieve about?’

2.12 and 2.13

न त्वेवाहं जातु नासं न त्वं नेमे जनाधिपाः।
न चैव न भविष्यामः सर्वे वयमतः परम्॥
अहम् जातु न आसम् न तु एव त्वम् न इमे जनाधिपाः न।
अतः परम् च वयम् सर्वे न भविष्यामः न एव॥
देहिनोऽस्मिन्यथा देहे कौमारं यौवनं जरा।
तथा देहान्तरप्राप्तिर्धीरस्तत्र न मुह्यति॥
देहिनः अस्मिन् देहे यथा कौमारम् यौवनम् जरा
तथा देहान्तर-प्राप्तिः तत्र धीरः न मुह्यति॥

‘It is not that I, or you, or these kings did not exist before this. Nor will there be a time in the future when, all of us will cease to exist. In this body, the *atman* passes through childhood, youth and old age. Like that, it obtains another body. A wise person is not confused by this.’

2.24 and 2.25

अच्छेद्योऽयमदाह्योऽयमक्लेद्योऽशोष्य एव च।
नित्यः सर्वगतः स्थाणुरचलोऽयं सनातनः॥
अयम् अच्छेद्यः अयम् अदाह्यः अयम् अक्लेद्यः अशोष्यः च एव।
अयम् नित्यः सर्वगतः स्थाणुः अचलः सनातनः॥
अव्यक्तोऽयमचिन्त्योऽयमविकार्योऽयमुच्यते।
तस्मादेवं विदित्वैनं नानुशोचितुमर्हसि॥
अयम् अव्यक्तः अयम् अचिन्त्यः अयम् अविकार्यः उच्यते।
तस्मात् एनम् एवम् विदित्वा अनुशोचितुम् न अर्हसि॥

‘It cannot be cut. It cannot be burnt. It cannot be made wet. It cannot be dried either. It is eternal and present everywhere. It is stable and does not move. It is eternal. It has been said to be without manifestation. It cannot be thought of. It is without transformation. Therefore, knowing that it is like that, you should not grieve.’

Individuals differ in abilities and life outcomes. All individuals aren’t the same. There is a book by Rowan Hooper,⁴⁷ which probes why and how certain humans excel at some activities. It is a book on science, not on dharma or the Bhagavad Gita. Hooper reviews all the various studies that have been done and assesses can be tracked down to genes (nature) and not environment (nurture). Here are some random snapshots from this book. Almost 60 per cent of differences in ‘high intelligence’ are genetic. Superior memory and the ability to speak multiple languages depends on genes. Bravery, running and a long lifespan have something to do with the genes. To quote Rowan Hooper,

We’ve seen throughout this book that how well you are able to do something depends on how you are raised, what you eat and what you experience, how you train and practise, as well as what you are born with. The environment nurtures, interacts with and modifies your genes. It does not overcome the influence of your genes—it works with them, turning them on and off, boosting some and suppressing others. There is no such thing as ‘nature versus nurture’. It is never genes or environment; it is always both things, together.

Many people are unfamiliar with this genetic research, most of it ongoing, and the outcome of the last twenty-odd years. Let me reinforce this with a quote from another book. This is written by Adam Rutherford.⁴⁸ Rutherford was a scientist while Hooper wasn’t.

Many differences between people are seen in chunks of DNA, which vary in the size of that chunk, and the number of times it is repeated... Your face, your physiology, your metabolism, your experience, your family, your DNA and your history are the contrivances of cosmic happenstance in a fully indifferent universe. We’re unique in our DNA, but it was drawn from millions of past lives.

Before the Human Genome Project, and certainly forty years ago, any suggestion that such attributes depended on the genes would have been dismissed as pseudo-science. Ascribing some part of the differences to the genes is not a theory. It is an empirical fact. Science still doesn’t have a theory to explain these differences, as embedded in the genes. Karma in this life and accumulated karma over past lives is a theory. Indeed, it is the only theory we have, to explain innate differences among individuals. I couldn’t help but smile when I noticed that expression ‘past lives’ in Adam

Rutherford's book. He meant the past lives of our ancestors. Karma is about your past lives.

If it is a theory, there must be evidence. Actually, there is, even if science tries to dismiss this as pseudo-science. For instance, read the various books by Brian Weiss.⁴⁹ Or a book by a psychiatrist, Ian Stevenson.⁵⁰ Check out the cases investigated by the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia, or a book by Jim Tucker.⁵¹ It is mostly children who remember their past lives. No doubt, as they progress towards becoming adults, these memories are suppressed, perhaps also because of societal pressure. Therefore, there is evidence and all of it cannot possibly be attributed to fraud. Why don't you remember? Do you remember everything that happened in this life? You don't. Survival requires you to suppress the misery and the pain, erase it. If we remembered our past lives, I don't think we would be able to handle it. We would go mad. It is best to focus on our present karma.

4.5

श्री भगवानुवाच

बहूनि मे व्यतीतानि जन्मानि तव चार्जुन।

तान्यहं वेद सर्वाणि न त्वं वेत्थ परन्तप॥

परन्तप अर्जुन मे तव च बहूनि जन्मानि व्यतीतानि

तानि सर्वाणि अहम् वेद त्वम् न वेत्थ॥

The illustrious Bhagavan said, 'O Arjuna! I have been through many births and so have you. O scorcher of enemies! I know them, but you do not.'

I must follow the karma in my present life. That is my dharma, given my position in my present life. Dharma and karma are linked. The acts of dharma or *adharmā*, as the case may be, contribute to my accumulated karma. Without undertaking tasks, it is impossible to exist.

3.35

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात्।
स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः॥
स्वनुष्ठितात् परधर्मात् विगुणः स्वधर्मः श्रेयान्।
स्वधर्मे निधनम् श्रेयः परधर्मः भय-आवहः॥

‘One’s own dharma, even if followed imperfectly, is superior to someone else’s dharma, even if followed perfectly. Someone else’s dharma brings great fear.’

18.47

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात्।
स्वभावनियतं कर्म कुर्वन्नाप्नोति किल्बिषम्॥
विगुणः स्वधर्मः स्वनुष्ठितात् पर-धर्मात् श्रेयान्।
स्वभाव-नियतम् कर्म कुर्वन् किल्बिषम् न आप्नोति॥

‘One’s own dharma, even if followed imperfectly, is superior to someone else’s dharma, even if followed perfectly. There is no sin if one undertakes one’s natural tasks.’

But the trouble is that, most of the time, I don’t know what constitutes dharma and what constitutes *adharma*. To illustrate, let me tell you four stories. We are usually very sure of what is right and what is wrong. We tend to look at the world through a prism of black and white, good and bad. Dharma and karma are not like that. The word dharma is used in many senses and is, therefore, difficult to translate into English, since it means different things in different contexts. There is dharma that is about mokshadharmā, the search for ultimate truth and emancipation. There is dharma that is about what the four varnas and four *ashramas* should do. There is the dharma of the king—*raja* dharma. However, transcending all this, there is the notion of an individual’s dharma. Given a certain situation, what should an individual do? Given a certain situation, an individual takes a decision. He/She accordingly bears the consequences of that decision. The individual took a decision in a certain context, perceiving that to be his/her dharma. He/She has to face the consequences. That is karma. Karma is,

thus, the flip side of individual dharma. In exactly the same situation, a different individual might take a different decision and his/her karma would be different.

This reminds me a bit about two texts connected to King Vikramaditya. We know little about King Vikramaditya. Vikramaditya is a title rather than a name. The title means someone whose valour is like that of the sun. There are emperors who have assumed the title of Vikramaditya—Chandragupta II being an example. But there was also a legendary King Vikramaditya, and scholars do not agree about identifying this legendary King Vikramaditya with any one of the known historical King Vikramadityas. In Ujjain, this legendary ruler is present everywhere, irrespective of which historical Vikramaditya he is to be identified with. There are temples built by King Vikramaditya. There is the hill where Vikramaditya's throne was buried until King Bhoja discovered it in the eleventh century CE. Thereby hangs a tale. Whoever ascended that hill was suffused with immeasurable wisdom. (This trait manifested itself in some cowherd boys.) When this was reported to King Bhoja, he had the hill excavated, and a magnificent throne was discovered; it had thirty-two statuettes. When King Bhoja wished to be seated on the throne, the statuettes restrained him. He was told, 'This is King Vikramaditya's throne. He was a phenomenally wise and great king. To be seated on the throne, you must be as wise as him.' Then, one by one, the thirty-two statuettes (each of which was a cursed *apsara*) told a story about King Vikramaditya's wisdom. These stories are collectively known as *Simhasana Dvatrimsika*, or *Singhasan Battisi*. The earliest versions of this text go back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The use of the word 'version' is important. There was no printing at the time, and written rendering came much later. Stories were passed down by word of mouth, preserved through oral transmission.

Consequently, even though there may have been a common origin, there were regional versions and variations. This is true of *Simhasana Dvatrimsika*, as well as of another text associated with the legendary King Vikramaditya. This text is known as *Vetala Panchavimshati*, or *Vetala Pacchisi*. A *vetala* is a demon or spirit, almost always male. But it isn't any arbitrary demon or spirit. Specifically, it is a demon that possesses a dead body with an ulterior motive. This text has twenty-five stories about the *vetala*, more accurately, stories about the *vetala* and King Vikramaditya. Each story has a puzzle that King Vikramaditya must solve. And it is not

like the solutions are easy. In *Simhasana Dvatrimsika*, King Vikramaditya is a historical person and King Bhoja hears about him from the statuettes. In *Vetala Panchavimshati*, King Vikramaditya is the protagonist. But whether in the thirty-two stories or the twenty-five, there is no clear answer to the puzzle, although King Vikramaditya does furnish one possible solution.

But I promised to tell you four stories. The first story, about Jataharini, is from the Markandeya Purana. King Anamitra had a son named Chakshusha. Chakshusha was wise and remembered his past lives. As a newborn, he lay down on his mother's lap. His mother, Giribhadra, lovingly embraced him, but Chakshusha burst out laughing. A trifle angry and astounded, his mother wanted to know why he was laughing. Chakshusha said, 'Mother, look at that female cat. It is waiting for an opportunity to eat me. It is looking at me longingly. You can't see Jataharini, but I can. That she-demon is also looking at me longingly, waiting to seize me. The cat and Jataharini are both driven by their selfish reasons. Your love is no different. It is also selfish. The female cat and she-demon want their gratification from me immediately. You will want it at some time in the future. You also want something from me. Besides, who am I? You hardly know me. I have been born five or seven days ago. Yet, you lovingly addresses me as your son.' At this, his mother was disgusted and left him. Seizing the opportunity, Jataharini grabbed him. The she-demon is so named because she is the one who abducts (*harini*) newborn babies (*jata*). Jataharini was mischievous. There was another king named Vikranta. He too had just had one son. Jataharini placed Chakshusha on the bed in King Vikranta's palace and took his son away and placed him in someone else's house.

That is what Jataharini always does, causing confusion by exchanging newborn babies. In the process, she always eats the third one. (This tells us that the infant mortality rate was 333 per thousand.) King Vikranta performed all the required *samskaras* for the one he took to be his son. One of these *samskaras* is known as *namakarana*, when the child gets a name. King Vikranta gave him the name Ananda. A subsequent *samskara* is *upanayana*, when the boy is invested with the sacred thread. After the *upanayana* ceremony was over, Ananda's guru told him, 'Go and prostrate yourself before your mother first.' Ananda burst out laughing. 'Which mother shall I go and prostrate myself before? The one who gave birth to me, or the one who reared me?' 'What do you mean?' exclaimed the guru. 'Your mother is Haimini, King Vikranta's wife. Haimini is Jarutha's

daughter and she married King Vikranta. Who else can be your mother?’ ‘Certainly not,’ replied Ananda. ‘I am King Anamitra’s son and Haimini is not my mother. Haimini’s son is Chaitra. Chaitra lives in Vishalagrama and has been brought up as the son of the brahmana Agravadha. Go and fetch King Vikranta’s real son from Vishalagrama. Who is whose son? Who is whose father? In this life itself, I have had two fathers and two mothers. Across lives, I have had many fathers and many mothers. Father, mother, son—all these notions begin with birth and end with death. They aren’t eternal. I am not interested in all this. I am going off to the forest to engage in austerities.’ Ananda stressed that Chaitra should be brought. *Upanayana* isn’t quite the point. Eventually, there would have been other sacraments, leading to Ananda becoming the heir to King Vikranta. He could have returned to King Anamitra’s house. What about Chaitra? Having been brought up as a brahmana, should he have agreed to become King Vikranta’s heir? There are issues of conflict of dharma and karma.

One of the most delightful stories about the conflict of dharma and karma is Harishchandra’s account. This is mentioned in many texts. I will recount the Markandeya Purana version. King Harishchandra lived in *treta yuga*. He was a good ruler. Once, Harishchandra pursued a deer in the forest. He heard the sound of some women crying, ‘Save us.’ Abandoning the deer, the king told them he would protect them. After all, it was a king’s dharma to protect his subjects, especially women. These women were actually the divinities of different kinds of learning. They were screaming in fear because the sage Vishvamitra had resorted to austerities, in an attempt to master these different kinds of learning. Harishchandra promised to protect them without realizing Vishvamitra was involved. When Harishchandra saw that it was Vishvamitra, he was terrified. ‘Please, pardon me,’ he begged. ‘In protecting the women, I was only following a king’s dharma.’ ‘Isn’t a king’s dharma to donate too?’ asked Vishvamitra. ‘I am a brahmana. I am asking you to give me something.’ King Harishchandra immediately gave Vishvamitra everything he possessed—the kingdom, his treasury and his servants. The only thing left was King Harishchandra himself, and his wife (Shaibya) and son (Rohitashva). When Harishchandra handed over everything he possessed, Vishvamitra asked him to leave what was now Vishvamitra’s kingdom.

But just as he was about to leave, Vishvamitra stopped him. ‘What about the royal sacrifice I performed for you? That *dakshina* (fee for

officiating at the sacrifice) is still due to me. You can't leave without paying me that.' Harishchandra said that he had nothing else left to give. However, if Vishvamitra gave him a month, he would pay him the *dakshina*. Vishvamitra agreed to this, but also told him that if he did not adhere to his pledge, Vishvamitra would curse him. With his wife and son, he went to Varanasi. Since they travelled slowly, a month had passed by the time they reached Varanasi. As Harishchandra was about to enter Varanasi, he saw Vishvamitra standing at the gate. 'Where is my *dakshina*?' asked the sage. 'A month has passed.' 'Not quite,' replied Harishchandra. 'Half of a day is still left. Wait for half a day and I will pay you your *dakshina*.' Vishvamitra left, promising to return when the day was over. But where would the money come from? 'Protect your dharma. Protect your pledge. You have never deviated from the truth. Sell me and get the money,' said Shaibya. There was no way Harishchandra was going to agree to this. But there was the question of Vishvamitra's *dakshina* and Harishchandra was torn apart by the conflict of dharma. How could he do something as abhorrent as selling his wife? Many people today would say Harishchandra was a 'bad husband'. How can a husband sell his wife?

Eventually, he decided to sell Shaibya and pay Vishvamitra. As he stood there and proclaimed that his wife was for sale, an aged brahmana arrived there and offered to buy this 'servant-maid'. This being agreed to, the brahmana started to drag Shaibya away. When his mother was being dragged away, Rohitashva wept and clung onto her garment. Shaibya pleaded with the brahmana that he should buy Rohitashva too. Therefore, the brahmana paid some more money to Harishchandra and took Shaibya and Rohitashva away. It was now afternoon and Vishvamitra arrived, asking for his *dakshina*. Harishchandra handed over whatever he had obtained as payment for Shaibya and Rohitashva. 'Is this all?' exclaimed Vishvamitra angrily. 'Is this an appropriate *dakshina* for me? I will curse you.' Since a quarter of the day was still left, Harishchandra pleaded with him. Harishchandra had no option but to offer himself for sale now. Along came a chandala named Pravira and he offered to buy Harishchandra. As a king descended from the solar dynasty, Harishchandra had no desire to sell himself to a chandala. Wouldn't it be better to be cursed by Vishvamitra instead? While Harishchandra and the chandala were conversing, Vishvamitra turned up and castigated Harishchandra. How could he not sell

himself and pay Vishvamitra's *dakshina*? That is what Harishchandra did. He sold himself to the chandala and paid Vishvamitra.

Harishchandra was taken away to the chandala's house. The chandala had a contract over the cremation grounds of Varanasi. Anything left of the corpses, garments and things like that, were for him to strip away and take. The chandala entrusted this task to Harishchandra, and said, 'Remain here night and day, waiting for the dead bodies to arrive. One-sixth of what is obtained from corpses is to be given to the king. Half is my share and one-third is your salary.' This is what Harishchandra did and he was reduced to the state of a chandala himself. His body was rough and coarse all over. He had a mass of hair and exuded a bad odour. He rushed around here and there, with a staff in his hand. 'This is the price I have obtained for this corpse. This is my share. This belongs to the king. This belongs to the chief chandala.' Saying this, the king rushed around in different directions. He assumed a different kind of life. He was clad in a garment made of tattered rags stitched together. His face, arms, stomach and feet were smeared with ash from funeral pyres. He was satisfied with the many kinds of food that were offered to the corpses. His head was ornamented with garlands that he gathered from them. Twelve months passed. The king no longer remembered his wife or son.

When a year had passed, Shaibya arrived at the cremation ground, bearing a dead Rohitashva. He had been bitten by a snake. Harishchandra had changed so much that Shaibya couldn't recognize him. And Harishchandra couldn't recognize Shaibya and Rohitashva. But eventually, they recognized each other and lamented at their lot. Shaibya said, 'If this is destiny, then there is no help for dharma. There is no point to worshipping gods, brahmanas and others on earth. Without dharma, what is the point of truth, uprightness and non-violence? You were supremely devoted to dharma, but have been deprived of your own kingdom.' Harishchandra replied, 'We are miserable and hanker after our son. Let us beg Yama for him. Therefore, let us quickly go the place where our beloved son has gone.' They thought about killing themselves. But there was a problem there too. Harishchandra added, 'I am not even my own master. If I enter the fire without taking the chandala's permission, in the next birth, I will again become the servant of another chandala. Or I will descend into hell and become an insect that feeds on worms.' Nevertheless, after some more deliberation, they decided to immolate themselves in a fire. Harishchandra

kindled a funeral pyre for himself, his wife and his son. The gods arrived and dissuaded them. All this had been a device to test Harishchandra's devotion to dharma and Vishvamitra also arrived, along with the gods. There is a little bit more in the Harishchandra story. However, I wished to focus on the dharma and karma dilemma. The Harishchandra ghat in Varanasi, and the allied cremation ground, is named after King Harishchandra. There are several decisions he took on grounds of dharma.

As a third story, let me tell you about Chirakara. In the Mahabharata, after the Kurukshetra War there is a long section in which Bhishma instructs Yudhisthira while laying on his bed of arrows. This story is from that bit. Chirakara was the son of the sage Gautama. He was immensely wise, but he took a long time to decide. His name also means someone who takes a long time to act. He thought about the objective for a long time. He remained awake for a long time. He slept for a long time. He completed tasks after a long time. Therefore, he was known as Chirakara. He was also spoken of as lazy and limited in intelligence. People said that he was foolish and lacked farsightedness.

On one occasion, his father was angry at his mother's promiscuous behaviour. Ignoring the other sons, Gautama told Chirakara, 'Kill your mother.' Though he agreed when he was asked, as was his nature, Chirakara thought about this for a long time. He was cautious and always thought for a long time about what should be done. 'How will I follow the instructions of my father and yet not kill my mother? While apparently following dharma, how will I avoid being submerged in sin? Following the instructions of your father is supreme dharma. Yet, protecting my mother is my own dharma. How can one be happy after killing a woman and a mother? How can one obtain status after ignoring a father's orders? I cannot ignore what my father has said. I must nurture and protect my mother. How will I resist suffering on either score? Because the father nurtures and instructs, it is supreme dharma to regard him as the foremost among instructors. A father is everything to his son. The body and everything else have been given by the father alone. Therefore, one must act in accordance with one's father's words and not think about it at all. If one acts in accordance with one's father's words, one's sins are cleansed. The father is heaven. The father is dharma. When the father is pleased, all the gods are pleased.' But he continued. 'Let me now think about my mother. I have been born on earth as a compound of the five elements. But my mother was

the origin, like the two pieces of wood used to create a fire. When she is there, there is no reason for sorrow. When she is not there, there is hardship. Even when a person is divested of riches, his mother is there in the house. Even if a person has many sons and grandsons, even if he is one hundred years old, when he approaches his mother, he behaves like a two-year-old. Whether a person is capable or incapable, whether a person is fat or thin, the mother protects the son.

‘According to the ordinances, there is no one else who sustains in that way. When he is separated from his mother, he ages, he is distressed and the entire world seems to be empty. There is no shelter that is equal to a mother. There is no objective that is equal to a mother. There is no sanctuary equal to a mother. There is no protection equal to a mother. Because she bears him in her womb, she is known as Dhatri. Because she gives birth, she is known as Janani. Because she nurtures his limbs, she is known as Amba. Because she gives birth to a brave one, she is known as Virasu. Because she nurtures the child, she is known as Sushru. Unless his head is empty and he is devoid of his senses, which man will kill such a person? The mother knows the *gotra* and the mother knows who he has been born from. The mother’s pleasure comes from nurturing alone. The father’s affection is from a desire to have offspring. A woman cannot commit a crime. It is the man who commits the crime. She is a woman and a mother and occupies a position of greatest reverence. Even brutish animals know that such a person should not be killed.’

Chirakara thought for a long time, but couldn’t decide. After a long period of time had elapsed, Gautama returned. He had also thought about it for a long time and had decided that what he had proposed for his wife was improper. He was tormented by great grief, and tears flowed from his eyes. He was overcome with repentance, ‘I confront this hardship because I have had a virtuous and beloved woman killed. I should have protected my wife. Who will save me now? I acted hastily and commanded the intelligent Chirakara. But because he takes a long time to act, perhaps he can still save me from this sin. A person who takes a long time to act is fortunate. A fortunate person takes a long time to act. If you have taken a long time to act now, you will truly be Chirakara. Save me, your mother and all the austerities that I have accomplished. If you also save yourself from that sin, you will truly be Chirakara. You naturally take a long time to act and this long time is indicative of your wisdom. Make the truth about your name

successful today and be Chirakara. Your mother expected you for a long time. She bore you in her womb for a long time. Be Chirakara.'

Gautama saw Chirakara standing there. On seeing his father, Chirakara was extremely miserable. He bowed his head down. Gautama saw that his son was prostrate before him on the ground. He was extremely delighted to see that his wife was without harm. The son stood there humbly, with the weapon in his hand, expecting to be reprimanded. He asked if he should complete the task that had been assigned to him. The father saw that his son was still prostrate at his feet. He praised his son and said, 'May you live for a long time. O fortunate one! O Chirakara! Because of the long time you took, I have been saved from great misery.' Gautama continued, 'Patient people should take a long time to act. One should take a long time before severing a friendship. One should take a long time before making a friend. Whether it is in anger, insolence, pride, hatred, wicked deeds or unpleasant tasks, a person who takes a long time is praised.' Procrastination has a negative nuance. But is that what this story is telling us?

The last story about Alarka, Madalasa and Dattatreya, is from the Markandeya Purana. There was a prince named Ritadhvaja, also known as Kuvalayashva. He was the son of King Shatrujit. Ritadhvaja's wife was Madalasa. When Shatrujit died, Ritadhvaja became the king. Madalasa gave birth to her first son and Ritadhvaja named his son Vikranta. Hearing their son's name, Madalasa laughed. Once, the infant son was lying down on Madalasa's lap, weeping in indistinct tones. To soothe him, she said, 'O child! You are pure and you have no name. That has only been thought of now. You are not this body, consisting of the five elements. It does not belong to you. Why are you weeping? Or perhaps you are weeping because of your birth. Despite being pure, you have been born on earth, created out of many elements with qualities and devoid of qualities, with all the senses. In this world, a man is born weak. Created from the elements and nourished by the elements, he grows, with food, water and other things. But what belongs to you? What grows and what declines? This body is only a covering. When it is shattered, you will still remain. Do not be so foolish as to get attached to it. Because of good and bad deeds and because of delusion caused by insolence, you have been tied down to the bonds of this body. The father, the son, the mother and the beloved are terms that amount to nothing. This is mine. This is not mine. Do not get entangled in this aggregation of elements.' This is Madalasa's famous song and the Sanskrit

lyrics are wonderful. There are beautiful renditions in music, sometimes floating around on the Internet. The entire song is a bit longer, but this quote has the salient bits.

Thus instructed by Madalasa, Vikranta grew up. Since he had been soothed in that way, he developed understanding about the *atman*. He obtained his strength and his intelligence from his father. In a similar way, because of his mother's words, he developed understanding about the *atman*. Having developed this understanding since birth, the son became wise. He had no sense of 'mine' and his mind turned away from *garhasthya*. A second son was born and his father named him Subahu. Madalasa laughed again. As was the case earlier, she soothed the child again. As she spoke to the child, he too developed understanding. When the third son was born, the king addressed him as Shatrumardana. Madalasa laughed again. As before, she developed the child's understanding. Therefore, the child was without desire and did not pursue anything that would yield fruits. When the fourth son was born, the king wished to give him a name. He saw that Madalasa was laughing. Since she was laughing, the king was filled with great curiosity. He said, 'Whenever I wished to give a name, you laughed. Tell me the reason for this. I think that the names I gave, Vikranta, Subahu and Shatrumardana, were good ones. Since they indicate valour and pride, they are appropriate names for kshatriya. If you think those weren't appropriate names, then you give a name to the fourth son.' Madalasa replied,

'O great king! I must certainly do what you have commanded me to. I will therefore name your fourth son. This one will know about dharma and he will be famous in the world by the name of Alarka. Your youngest son will be intelligent.' Ritadhvaja heard the name the mother had thought for their son. He laughed and said, 'The name you have thought for my son is meaningless. (Etymologically, Alarka doesn't mean anything, though it does mean a mad dog.) What is the point of giving such a meaningless name?' Madalasa replied, 'O great king! Conferring a name is no more than customary practice. The names you have given also have no meaning. Wise people say that the *atman* pervades everything. The word "kranti" signifies that a person is going from one place to another place. But the *atman* that is in the body is everywhere and does not go. Therefore, in my view, a name like Vikranta is meaningless. You gave your son the name of Subahu (one with excellent arms). However, since the *atman* is without a form, this is

meaningless. You gave your third son the name of Shatrumardana (one who crushes enemies). But I think this is also meaningless. It is the same *atman* that exists in all bodies. Who is an enemy and who is a friend? It is only because of customary practice that such names are thought of. In that case, why are you of the view that the name Alarka alone is meaningless?’

Ritadhvaja had to agree that Madalasa was right. But when Madalasa started to speak to Alarka in exactly the same way that she had spoken to his elder brothers, Ritadhvaja protested. This was not fair, this was not dharma. A prince should not be instructed such that he turned away from his dharma of ruling the subjects and protecting them. After all, Alarka had been born as the son of a kshatriya. His karma was that of a kshatriya. At this, Madalasa taught Alarka about the dharma of kings. ‘O son! Do good deeds to friends and destroy those who are evil-hearted. Conquer the six enemies of *kama* (desire), *krodha* (anger), *lobha* (avarice), *moha* (delusion), *mada* (arrogance) and *matsarya* (jealousy). Do not think about what is transient and use your understanding to counter delusion.’

Instructed thus, Alarka grew up. After his sacred thread ceremony was over, he requested his mother for some more instructions about *raja dharma*, the dharma of kings. Madalasa said, ‘Having been instated in the kingdom, one must rule over the earth and perform all the tasks that delight subjects, as long as they do not conflict with one’s own dharma. Since they strike at the roots of truth, one must avoid the vices. By ensuring that counsel is not divulged outside, one must protect oneself from enemies. One must distinguish the wicked from the virtuous and identify advisers who have been corrupted by the enemy. Using spies, the king must ascertain the enemy’s efforts.

‘A king should not trust his friends, his acquaintances or his relatives. If the task so requires, the king should trust even those who are not friends. The king must not succumb to desire. He must first control himself, then the ministers, servants and citizens. It is only after he knows this has been done that he acts against the enemy. A wicked king is destroyed by enemies like desire, anger, avarice, insolence, pride and delight. A king must learn from the conduct of a crow, a cuckoo, a bee, a crane, a snake, a peacock, a swan, a cock and iron. Perseverance from the crow, accumulation from the cuckoo, collection of taxes from the bee, patience from the crane, concentrated virulence from the snake, extension (of the kingdom) from the peacock, discrimination from the swan, arising at the right time from the

cock and hardness from iron. Towards the enemy, a king must behave like an owl. (Strike when the enemy is not aware.) At the right time, the king must act like an ant. (Accumulate like the ant.) His acts will be known as much as fire in kindling or seeds in silk-cotton. (They will only manifest themselves at the right time.) Like the sun and the moon, he must protect the earth through his policy. The king must formulate policies on the basis of *sama*, *dana*, *danda* and *bheda* and protect the earth. (The traditional four means are *sama* [conciliation or negotiation], *dana* [bribery], *danda* [punishment] and *bheda* [dissension].) If he wishes to protect the earth, the king must follow the conduct of the five—Indra (the king of the gods, the lord of rains), Surya (the sun), Yama (the god of the afterworld and death), Soma (the moon) and Vayu (the wind).

‘For four months, Indra sustains the earth through his showers. Like that, the lord of the earth must nurture the world through his generosity. For eight months, Surya draws up the water through his rays. In that way, the king must collect taxes through subtle means. When it is the right time, Yama acts against both friend and foe. Like that, the king must be impartial in his treatment of the virtuous and the wicked, regardless of whether he likes them or dislikes them. The sight of the full moon fills a man with delight. Likewise, when all the subjects are satisfied, it means the king has followed auspicious conduct. Secretly, the wind circulates among all beings. Like that, the king must use his spies amidst citizens, advisers, enemies and relatives. If the dharma of the varnas and the *ashramas* does not suffer in a kingdom, then that king obtains eternal happiness in this world and in the next one.’ But Alarka would not remain the king forever. This teaching was about *raja* dharma and dharma has a time and a place. Madalasa also had something to say about the dharma that was beyond *raja dharma*.

When King Ritadhvaja became old, he left for the forest along with his wife, Madalasa. Alarka, who had married by then, became the king. To ensure that her son did not get attached to desire and enjoyment, Madalasa spoke her final words to her son. She said, ‘When you are ruling the kingdom, you may suffer from intolerable grief because of separation from one you love or separation from a relative. Since a householder suffers from notions of “I” and “mine”, such misery may occur. I am giving you this ring. At that time, take it out and read what is written on it in fine letters.’ Having said this, she gave him the golden ring. Alarka ruled over the

subjects properly, as if they were his sons. He punished the wicked and protected the virtuous. He ruled the earth for many years, without becoming attached to dharma, *artha* or *kama*. But he was still attached to enjoyment. He had not yet conquered his senses. He was still distracted. Alarka had a brother named Subahu who had left for the forest, and Subahu thought for a long time about how he would generate understanding in Alarka. He thought that if he were to seek the help of the king's enemies, it might trigger matters. The king of Kashi was such an enemy. That king raised an enemy against Alarka and sent a messenger with the message, 'Hand over the kingdom to Subahu.' But Alarka was a kshatriya. How could he hand over the kingdom? That could not be his dharma or karma. The king of Kashi laid siege to Alarka's capital and won over his allies. Alarka suffered a lot.

When he was extremely depressed, he remembered the ring. He bathed and purified himself, making the best of brahmanas pronounce benedictions. He took out the instructions written on the ring and saw the words that his mother had written down. 'Attachment of every sort must be given up. If you are incapable of doing this, associate with the virtuous. Association with the virtuous is medication. Desire of every sort must be given up. If one is incapable of doing this, one should engage in acts that lead to liberation. That is the medication.' Having read the words several times, he made up his mind that this was the best. He made up his mind to strive for liberation and non-attachment. But how should one go about it? The king pondered about association with the virtuous. Suffering from great misery, he decided to go to the sage Dattatreya. He said, 'O sage! I have sought refuge with you. I am suffering greatly from being excessively attached to desire. Please dispel my misery.'

Dattatreya replied, 'O king! I will dispel your misery today. But tell me truthfully. What has caused this grief? Who do you belong to? Whose misery is this? One should reflect on the truth about this. Body, another body, without a body, all bodies—one should reflect on this.' Alarka thought about this, the *atman*, its habitation and the various kinds of grief. For a long time, the king reflected on this. Eventually, he smiled and said, 'I am not earth. I am not water. I am not fire. I am not wind. I am not space. With all these having gathered in the body, I desire happiness. The five elements have an excess or deficit in the body and give rise to sensations of happiness and unhappiness. However, if this belongs to me, there can be

nothing beneficial for me. There can always be a lot of happiness or unhappiness. There is an excess or deficit, an increase or decrease. Hence, I should discard any sense of ownership and realize what is distinctive. My body is the union of the elements. Why do happiness and unhappiness of the body have anything to do with me? Happiness and unhappiness are states of the mind. That is the nature of the mind. Since I am not the mind, I do not experience happiness or unhappiness. I am not *ahamkara*. I am not the mind. I am not intelligence. The sense of unhappiness results from my inner faculties. Since I am beyond these, what does it have to do with me? I am not the body. I am not the mind. I am distinct from the body and the mind. Thus, if there is happiness or unhappiness experienced by the body, what does that have to do with me? The one who desires this kingdom is my father's son, born from an accumulation of the five elements. Since I am not the body, but am something else, the qualities of the body have nothing to do with me. I do not possess hands and other limbs. I do not possess flesh. I do not possess bones and the divisions into nerves and arteries. Who do these elephants, horses, chariots and other things belong to? A man has nothing to do with things in this world. Therefore, I have no enemies. I have no pleasure. I have no pain. I have no city. I have no treasury. I have no horses. I have no elephants. I have no soldiers. I do not possess these. Who has them? Just as they do not belong to me, they do not belong to anyone else. Inside a jug, a pitcher or a waterpot, space can be seen in many different forms. Like that, because of differences in bodies, Subahu and the king of Kashi appear in different forms.'

Alarka bowed down before Dattatreya and addressed him in these humble words. 'Having perceived correctly, I no longer suffer from any misery. Those who do not perceive correctly are always immersed in an ocean of grief. When a man's intelligence has a sense of ownership in something, it is that very thing that brings him misery. When a predator eats a domesticated animal, there is sorrow because of ownership. But there is none when it eats a sparrow or a rat. Since I am beyond Prakriti, I am neither happy, nor unhappy. Anything created is subject to the principles of creation and therefore feels joy or misery.' Dattatreya replied, 'It is exactly as you have described. The sense of "mine" is the root cause of misery. When there is no sense of "mine", there is withdrawal from misery. Because of my question, this excellent knowledge has been generated in you. Like wisps of cotton from a silk-cotton tree, it has blown away your sense of

“mine”. “I” and “mine” are the seeds from which has germinated this tree of ignorance with the giant trunk. The house and land are its branches, the wife and son are its twigs. Wealth and grain are its large leaves. The tree grows over time. Its main flowers are good and bad deeds, happiness and unhappiness are the main fruits. Relationships are the outcome of confusion and sprinkle it, acting as impediments along the path of liberation. The desire to act is like bees that surround this gigantic tree of ignorance. Exhausted by *samsara*, people seek refuge under the shade of this tree, and thus subject themselves to the misery of confusion and ignorance. How can they find happiness? People who sever this tree of “I” and “mine” with the axe of learning and the sharp flint of association with the virtuous are those who proceed along the right path. They reach the cool grove of the brahman, bereft of dust and thorns. They attain supreme wisdom and refrain from action. O king! The aggregation of the elements and the senses is gross. I am not that and nor are you. Neither of us is the mind. The *atman* that is in the body is beyond this combination of the *gunas*. The gnat is distinct from the *udumbura* tree (fig tree) it sits on. A blade of grass is distinct from a clump of *munja* grass. A fish is distinct from the water it inhabits. O king! Despite appearing as one, the *atman* is distinct from the body it occupies.’

Alarka understood. But there was still much more to be learnt. He asked, ‘However, since I am still attracted to material objects, there is no stability in my mind. How does one avoid being born repeatedly? How does one proceed so that one can attain union with the eternal?’ The Markandeya Purana provides in detail what the sage Dattatreya taught Alarka about yoga. But that does not concern us.

The point of relating these four stories to you is that it is extremely difficult to know what dharma and karma are. It is impossible to know what is good and bad. Therefore, what should be done is never evident. What seems right might actually be wrong and vice-versa. We say that Rama was a good son. He followed his father’s instructions. Is it desirable that a son should do what his father tells him? Prahlada, Vishnu’s devotee, didn’t do that. He opposed what his father, Hiranyakashipu, asked him to do. Yet, we say Prahlada was good. We say that Sita was a good wife. She followed her husband. Is it desirable that a wife should follow her husband? The sixteenth-century mystic poetess, Mirabai, was devoted to Krishna. She didn’t do what her husband and in-laws asked her to do. Yet, we say

Mirabai was good. Lakshmana followed his elder brother, Rama, and is held up as a paragon of virtue because he followed his elder brother. Vibhishana disowned his elder brother, Ravana, and is held up as a paragon of virtue because he opposed him. Dharma and karma are unclear. Who knows?

4.16 to 4.20

किं कर्म किमकर्मेति कवयोऽप्यत्र मोहिताः।
 तत्ते कर्म प्रवक्ष्यामि यज्ज्ञात्वा मोक्ष्यसेऽशुभात्॥
 किम् कर्म किम् अकर्म इति अत्र कवयः अपि मोहिताः।
 तत् कर्म ते प्रवक्ष्यामि यत् ज्ञात्वा अशुभात् मोक्ष्यसे॥
 कर्मणो ह्यपि बोद्धव्यं बोद्धव्यं च विकर्मणः।
 अकर्मणश्च बोद्धव्यं गहना कर्मणो गतिः॥
 कर्मणः हि अपि बोद्धव्यम् विकर्मणः च बोद्धव्यम्
 अकर्मणः च बोद्धव्यम् कर्मणः गतिः गहना॥
 कर्मण्यकर्म यः पश्येदकर्मणि च कर्म यः।
 स बुद्धिमान् मनुष्येषु स युक्तः कृत्स्नकर्मकृत्॥
 यः कर्मणि अकर्म पश्येत् अकर्मणि च यः कर्म सः
 मनुष्येषु बुद्धिमान् सः युक्तः कृत्स्न-कर्म-कृत्॥
 यस्य सर्वे समारम्भाः कामसङ्कल्पवर्जिताः।
 ज्ञानाग्निदग्धकर्माणं तमाहुः पण्डितं बुधाः॥
 यस्य सर्वे समारम्भाः काम-सङ्कल्प-वर्जिताः
 तम् ज्ञान-अग्नि-दग्ध-कर्माणम् बुधाः पण्डितम् आहुः॥
 त्यक्त्वा वाकर्मफलासङ्गं नित्यतृप्तो निराश्रयः।
 कर्मण्यभिप्रवृत्तोऽपि नैव किञ्चित्करोति सः॥
 कर्म-फल-आसङ्गम् त्यक्त्वा नित्य-तृप्तः निराश्रयः
 सः कर्मणि अभिप्रवृत्तः अपि न एव किञ्चित् करोति॥

‘Even the wise are confused about what is karma and what is *akarma* [not undertaking karma]. Therefore, I will tell you about karma. Knowing this, you will be freed from everything inauspicious. One must understand about karma. One must understand about *vikarma* [prohibited karma]. One must understand about *akarma*. The progress of karma is mysterious. If a person perceives *akarma* in karma and karma in *akarma*, he is intelligent among

men. He is engaged in yoga and performs every kind of karma. If a person's efforts are devoid of all resolutions driven by desire, he has used the fire of jnana to burn up all his karma. The learned call him a wise person. If a person has given up all attachment to the fruits of karma, if he is always content and does not depend on anyone, then even when he is engaged in karma, he does nothing at all.'

Since all this is unclear, that's yet another reason to give up all sense of ownership over karma and its fruits.

4.21 and 4.22

निराशीर्यतचित्तात्मा त्यक्तसर्वपरिग्रहः।
शारीरं केवलं कर्म कुर्वन्नाप्नोति किल्बिषम्॥
निराशीः यत-चित्त-आत्मा त्यक्त-सर्व-परिग्रहः
केवलम् शारीरम् कर्म कुर्वन् किल्बिषम् न आप्नोति॥
यदृच्छालाभसन्तुष्टो द्वन्द्वातीतो विमत्सरः।
समः सिद्धावसिद्धौ च कृत्वापि न निबध्यते॥
यदृच्छा-लाभ-सन्तुष्टः द्वन्द्व-अतीतः विमत्सरः
सिद्धौ असिद्धौ च समः कृत्वा अपि न निबध्यते॥

'He has no desire. He has controlled his mind and senses. He has given up all ownership. It is his body alone that undertakes the karma. He does not suffer from any sin. He is satisfied with whatever he gets, without asking for it. He is beyond the opposites [happiness and misery, cold and heat, and so on]. He has no envy. He is impartial to success or failure. Even though he acts, he is not bound.'

3.19

तस्मादसक्तः सततं कार्यं कर्म समाचर।
असक्तो ह्याचरन्कर्म परमाप्नोति पूरुषः॥
तस्मात् असक्तः सततम् कार्यम् कर्म समाचर।
हि पूरुषः असक्तः कर्म आचरन् परम् आप्नोति॥

‘Therefore, always undertake the task without being attached to the karma. A person who undertakes karma without being attached, obtains the highest end.’

3.25

सक्ताः कर्मण्यविद्वांसो यथा कुर्वन्ति भारत।
कुर्याद्विद्वांस्तथासक्तश्चिकीर्षुर्लोकसंग्रहम्॥
भारत अविद्वांसः यथा कर्मणि सक्ताः कुर्वन्ति
तथा लोक-संग्रहम् चिकीर्षुः विद्वान् असक्तः कुर्यात्॥

‘O Bharata [Arjuna]! Those who lack in knowledge are attached when they undertake karma. But desiring the welfare of the world, the learned should undertake it without being attached.’

6.1 and 6.2

श्री भगवानुवाच

अनाश्रितः कर्मफलं कार्यं कर्म करोति यः।
स संन्यासी च योगी च न निरग्निर्न चाक्रियः॥
यः कर्म-फलम् अनाश्रितः कार्यम् कर्म करोति
सः संन्यासी च योगी च निरग्निः न अक्रियः च न॥
यं संन्यासमिति प्राहुर्योगं तं विद्धि पाण्डव।
न ह्यसंन्यस्तसङ्कल्पो योगी भवति कश्चन॥
पाण्डव यम् संन्यासम् इति प्राहुः तम् योगम् विद्धि
कश्चन असंन्यस्त-सङ्कल्पः योगी न भवति हि॥

The illustrious Bhagavan said, ‘A *sannyasi* and a yogi is a person who performs the required karma, without depending on the fruits of that karma. A person who gives up the sacrificial fire, or gives up the rites, is not that. O Pandava! Know that what is spoken of as *sannyasa* [jnana yoga] is the same as yoga [karma yoga]. Without giving up expectations, one can never become a yogi.’

2.51

कर्मजं बुद्धियुक्ता हि फलं त्यक्त्वा मनीषिणः।
जन्मबन्धविनिर्मुक्ताः पदं गच्छन्त्यनामयम्॥
हि बुद्धि-युक्ताः मनीषिणः कर्मजम् फलं त्यक्त्वा
जन्म-बन्ध-विनिर्मुक्ताः अनामयम् पदम् गच्छन्ति॥

‘Learned ones who possess intelligence discard the fruits that result from karma. Having thus been freed from the bondage of birth, they obtain a state that is bereft of blemishes.’

⁴⁷Hooper, Rowan. *Superhuman: Life at the Extremes of Mental and Physical Ability*. Little, Brown, 2012.

⁴⁸Rutherford, Adam. *A Brief History of Everyone Who Ever Lived: The Stories in Our Genes*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016.

⁴⁹Available at: <https://www.brianweiss.com/>. Last accessed on 7 June 2020.

⁵⁰Stevenson, Ian. *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*. University Press of Virginia, 1966.

⁵¹Tucker, Jim. B. *Life Before Life: A Scientific Investigation of Children's Memories of Previous Lives*. St Martin's Press, 2005.

AHAMKARA AND THE PATH OF BHAKTI

3.3 to 3.8

श्री भगवानुवाच

लोकेऽस्मिन्द्विविधा निष्ठा पुराप्रोक्ता मयानघ।

ज्ञानयोगेन सांख्यानां कर्मयोगेन योगिनाम्॥

अनघ अस्मिन् लोके साङ्ख्यानाम् ज्ञान-योगेन
योगिनाम् कर्म-योगेन द्विविधा निष्ठा पुरा मया प्रोक्ता॥

न कर्मणामनारम्भान् नैष्कर्म्यं पुरुषोऽश्नुते।

न च संन्यसनादेव सिद्धिं समधिगच्छति॥

कर्मणाम् अनारम्भात् पुरुषः नैष्कर्म्यं न अश्नुते।

च संन्यसनात् एव सिद्धिम् न समधिगच्छति॥

न हि कश्चित् क्षणमपि जातु तिष्ठत्यकर्मकृत्।

कार्यते ह्यवशः कर्म सर्वः प्रकृतिजैर्गुणैः॥

कश्चित् जातु क्षणम् अपि अकर्मकृत न हि तिष्ठति।

प्रकृतिजैः गुणैः सर्वः हि अवशः कर्म कार्यते॥

कर्मेन्द्रियाणि संयम्य य आस्ते मनसा स्मरन्।

इन्द्रियार्थान्विमूढात्मा मिथ्याचारः स उच्यते॥

यः कर्म-इन्द्रियाणि संयम्य मनसा स्मरन् आस्ते

इन्द्रियार्थान् सः विमूढात्मा मिथ्याचारः उच्यते॥

यस्त्विन्द्रियाणि मनसा नियम्यारभतेऽर्जुन।

कर्मेन्द्रियैः कर्मयोगमसक्तः स विशिष्यते॥

अर्जुन यः तु मनसा इन्द्रियाणि नियम्य असक्तः कर्म-इन्द्रियैः
 कर्म-योगम् आरभते सः विशिष्यते॥
 नियतं कुरु कर्म त्वं कर्म ज्यायो ह्यकर्मणः।
 शरीरयात्रापि च ते न प्रसिद्धयेदकर्मणः॥
 त्वं नियतम् कर्म कुरु अकर्मणः हि कर्म ज्यायः।
 ते शरीर-यात्रा च अपि अकर्मणः न प्रसिद्धयेत्॥

The illustrious Bhagavan said, ‘O unblemished one! For this world, I have earlier spoken about two paths—jnana yoga for those who follow *samkhya* and karmayoga for yogis. Freedom from karma is not achieved by not undertaking karma. One does not achieve success through *sannyasa* [renunciation]. Even for a short while, no one can exist without undertaking karma. Because of the *gunas* that result from nature, everyone is helplessly forced to undertake karma. If one restrains the organs of action, but the mind remembers the objects of the senses, one is described as deluded, indulging in falsehood. O Arjuna! However, if a person uses his mind to restrain the senses and uses his organs of action to perform karmayoga in a non-attached way, he is superior. Therefore, undertake the prescribed karma. Undertaking karma is superior to not undertaking karma. Without undertaking karma, even the survival of the body is not possible.’

13.25

ध्यानेनात्मनि पश्यन्ति केचिदात्मानमात्मना।
 अन्ये सांख्येन योगेन कर्मयोगेन चापरे॥
 केचित् ध्यानेन आत्मना आत्मनि आत्मानम् पश्यन्ति।
 अन्ये साङ्ख्येन योगेन अपरे च कर्म-योगेन॥

‘Some use *dhyana* to see the *paramatman* in the *jivatman* within their own selves. Others use *samkhya* yoga [jnana yoga] and still others use karma yoga.’

There is an impression that floats around that the Bhagavad Gita speaks of jnana yoga, karma yoga and bhakti yoga, as if they are different. I have

quoted Rajaji and Sri Aurobindo earlier, to the effect that this is not true at all. Without bhakti, there can be no true jnana or karma.

5.5

यत्सांख्यैः प्राप्यते स्थानं तद्योगैरपि गम्यते।
एकं सांख्यं च योगं च यः पश्यति स पश्यति॥
यत् स्थानम् साङ्ख्यैः प्राप्यते तत् योगैः अपि गम्यते।
यः साङ्ख्यम् च योगम् च एकम् पश्यति स पश्यति॥

‘Whatever place is obtained by those who practise *samkhya* [jnana yoga], is obtained by those who practise yoga [karma yoga]. A person who perceives *samkhya* and yoga as identical, is a person who truly sees.’

Bhakti is necessary to break down the *ahamkara*. Like the sage Kaushika who burnt down the crane, there can be *ahamkara* from jnana. Like many of us, there can be *ahamkara* from karma. The ‘I’ and the ‘mine’ cannot be broken without bhakti, without the surrendering.

3.27

प्रकृतेः क्रियमाणानि गुणैः कर्माणि सर्वशः।
अहङ्कारविमूढात्मा कर्ताऽहमिति मन्यते॥
प्रकृतेः गुणैः कर्माणि सर्वशः क्रियमाणानि
अहङ्कार-विमूढ-आत्मा अहम् कर्ता इति मन्यते॥

‘All karma is undertaken by the *gunas* of nature. Because a person is deluded by *ahamkara*, he thinks, “I am the doer”.’

5.8 to 5.11

नैव किञ्चित्करोमीति युक्तो मन्येत तत्त्ववित्।
 पश्यन् शृणवन्स्पृशञ्जिघ्रन्नशनगच्छन्स्वपन् श्वसन्॥
 प्रलपन्विसृजनगृहणन्नुन्मिषन्निमिषन्नपि।
 इन्द्रियाणीन्द्रियार्थेषु वर्तन्त इति धारयन्॥
 युक्तः तत्त्ववित् पश्यन् शृण्वन् स्पृशन् जिघ्रन् अशनन्
 गच्छन् स्वपन् श्वसन् प्रलपन् विसृजन् गृहणन्
 उन्मिषन् निमिषन् अपि इन्द्रियाणि इन्द्रिय-अर्थेषु वर्तन्ते इति धारयन्
 किञ्चित् न एव करोमि इति मन्येत॥
 ब्रह्मण्याधाय कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा करोति यः।
 लिप्यते न स पापेन पद्मपत्रमिवाम्भसा॥
 यः सङ्गम् त्यक्त्वा कर्माणि ब्रह्मणि आधाय करोति
 सः पद्म-पत्रम् अम्भसा इव पापेन न लिप्यते॥
 कायेन मनसा बुद्ध्या केवलैरिन्द्रियैरपि।
 योगिनः कर्म कुर्वन्ति सङ्गं त्यक्त्वाऽऽत्मशुद्धये॥
 कायेन मनसा बुद्ध्या केवलैः इन्द्रियैः अपि।
 योगिनः कर्म कुर्वन्ति सङ्गम् त्यक्त्वा आत्म-शुद्धये॥

‘A person who follows yoga and knows the truth should think, “I am not doing anything”, even when he sees, hears, touches, smells, eats, moves, sleeps, breathes, speaks, releases, accepts or opens and closes [the eyes]. He should remember that these are only the senses, circulating among the objects of the senses. A person who has given up all attachment and has vested karma in the brahman, is not touched by sin, just as the leaf of a lotus is not touched by water. To purify the self, a yogi gives up attachment and performs karma only with the body, mind, intellect and senses.’

8.22

पुरुषः स परः पार्थ भक्तया लभ्यस्त्वनन्यया।
यस्यान्तःस्थानि भूतानि येन सर्वमिदं ततम्॥
पार्थ भूतानि यस्य अन्तः-स्थानि येन इदम्।
सर्वम् ततम् सः तु परः पुरुषः अनन्यया भक्तया लभ्यः॥

‘O Partha! The supreme Purusha can be obtained through bhakti and nothing else. The *paramatman* pervades everything and all beings reside inside it.’

4.10 and 4.11

वीतरागभयक्रोधा मन्मया मामुपाश्रिताः।
बहवो ज्ञानतपसा पूता मद्भावमागताः॥
वीत-राग-भय-क्रोधाः मन्मयाः माम् उपाश्रिताः
ज्ञान-तपसा पूताः बहवः मद्भावम् आगताः॥
ये यथा मां प्रपद्यन्ते तांस्तथैव भजाम्यहम्।
मम वर्त्मानुवर्तन्ते मनुष्याः पार्थ सर्वशः॥
ये यथा माम् प्रपद्यन्ते तान् तथा एव अहम् भजामि।
पार्थ मनुष्याः सर्वशः मम वर्त्म अनुवर्तन्ते॥

‘Freed from attachment, fear and anger, there are many who have purified themselves through the austerities of jnana. Immersed in me, they have sought refuge with me and have attained my state. O Partha [Arjuna]! Whoever approaches me, in whatever way, in exactly that same way, I show them my favours. Everywhere, men follow my path.’

मत्तः परतरं नान्यत्किञ्चिदस्ति धनञ्जया।
मयि सर्वमिदं प्रोतं सूत्रे मणिगणा इव॥
धनञ्जय मत्तः परतरं अन्यत् किञ्चित् न अस्ति।
सूत्रे मणिगणाः इव इदम् सर्वम् मयि प्रोतम्॥

‘O Dhananjaya [Arjuna]! There is nothing superior to me. Like jewels on a string, everything is threaded in me.’

7.21

यो यो यां यां तनुं भक्तः श्रद्धयार्चितुमिच्छति।
तस्य तस्याचलां श्रद्धां तामेव विदधाम्यहम्॥
यः यः भक्तः याम् याम् तनुम् श्रद्धया अर्चितुम् इच्छति
तस्य तस्य ताम् एव श्रद्धाम् अहम् अचलाम् विदधामि॥

‘Whichever devotee wishes to faithfully worship me in whatever form, I make his devotion firm and unwavering in that particular form.’

9.26 and 9.27

पत्रं पुष्पं फलं तोयं यो मे भक्त्या प्रयच्छति।
तदहं भक्त्युपहतमश्नामि प्रयतात्मनः॥
यः पत्रम् पुष्पम् फलम् तोयम् भक्त्या मे प्रयच्छति।
प्रयत-आत्मनः भक्ति-उपहतम् तत् अहम् अश्नामि॥
यत्करोषि यदश्नासि यज्जुहोषि ददासि यत्।
यत्तपस्यसि कौन्तेय तत्कुरुष्व मदर्पणम्॥
कौन्तेय यत् करोषि यत् अश्नासि यत् जुहोषि।
यत् ददासि यत् तपस्यसि तत् मत् अर्पणम् कुरुष्व॥

‘Full of bhakti, if a pure-minded person offers me a leaf, a flower, a fruit or some water, I accept that. O Kaunteya [Arunja]! Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer [as an oblation], whatever you give [as a donation] and whatever austerities you undertake—offer all that to me.’

10.20

अहमात्मा गुडाकेश सर्वभूताशयस्थितः।
अहमादिश्च मध्यं च भूतानामन्त एव च॥
गुडाकेश अहम् सर्व-भूत-आशय-स्थितः आत्मा
भूतानाम् आदिः च मध्यम् च अन्तः च अहम् एव॥

‘O Gudakesha [Arjuna]! I am the *atman* that is located in the hearts of all beings. I am the beginning, the middle and the end of all beings.’

Hence, the fundamental message of the Bhagavad Gita is actually 18.66.

18.66

सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं ब्रज।
अहं त्वा सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः॥
सर्व-धर्मान् परित्यज्य माम् एकम् शरणम् ब्रज।
अहम् त्वा सर्व-पापेभ्यः मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः॥

‘Abandon all kinds of dharma and seek refuge only in me. I will free you from all sins. Do not grieve.’

I have quoted, with translations, shlokas from many chapters of the Bhagavad Gita. But there is one beautiful chapter I have not quoted much from. That is Chapter 11, on the Lord’s universal form. As we come towards the end, let me quote three shlokas from this chapter. When the first atomic bomb was exploded in 1945, in a subsequent interview, Robert Oppenheimer quoted from the Bhagavad Gita. That quote was also from Chapter 11, part of 11.32.

11.10 to 11.12

अनेकवक्त्रनयनमनेकाद्भुतदर्शनम्।
अनेकदिव्याभरणं दिव्यानेकोद्यतायुधम्॥
अनेक-वक्त्र-नयनम् अनेक-अद्भुत-दर्शनम्।
अनेक-दिव्य-आभरणम् दिव्य-अनेक-उद्यत-आयुधम्॥
दिव्यमाल्याम्बरधरं दिव्यगन्धानुलेपनम्।
सर्वाश्चर्यमयं देवमनन्तं विश्वतोमुखम्॥
दिव्य-माल्य-अम्बर-धरम् दिव्य-गन्ध-अनुलेपनम्
सर्व-आश्चर्यमयम् अनन्तम् विश्वतोमुखम् देवम्॥
दिवि सूर्यसहस्रस्य भवेद्युगपदुत्थिता।
यदि भाः सदृशी सा स्याद्भासस्तस्य महात्मनः॥
यदि दिवि सूर्य-सहस्रस्य भाः युगपत् उत्थिता भवेत्
सा तस्य महात्मनः भासः सदृशी स्यात्॥

‘With many mouths and eyes, with many wonderful things to see, adorned in many divine ornaments and with many divine weapons raised up; with divine garlands and garments, anointed with divine unguents, extremely resplendent and wonderful everywhere, infinite, and with faces in every direction; if the brilliance of a thousand suns simultaneously rises in the sky, then that can rival the brilliance of the great-souled one.’

You need the divine sight Krishna bestowed on Arjuna to see this form. The last shloka of the Bhagavad Gita is 18.78, spoken by Sanjaya, after the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna is over.

18.78

यत्र योगेश्वरः कृष्णो यत्र पार्थोधनुर्धरः तत्र।
श्रीर्विजयो भूतिर्ध्रुवा नीतिर्मतिर्मम॥
यत्र योगेश्वरः कृष्णः यत्र धनुर्धरः पार्थः।
तत्र श्रीः विजयः भूतिः ध्रुवा नीतिः मम मतिः॥

‘Wherever there are Krishna, the lord of yoga and Partha [Arjuna], the wielder of the bow, prosperity, victory, wealth and firm policy exist there. That is my view.’

I said at the beginning that there are 700 shlokas in the Bhagavad Gita. This is not a translation of the Bhagavad Gita. I have quoted shlokas not as they progressively occur in the chapters, but as they fit into the way I have structured this book. If you want to read the Bhagavad Gita chapter by chapter, use any of the numerous translations. This book is not meant to do that. Therefore, you might not have realized that I have actually quoted quite a few shlokas and given you their translations. The list is the following.

Chapter 1: Shlokas numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 25, 26, 27, 41, 42, 43—a total of sixteen

Chapter 2: Shlokas numbered 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 42, 43, 44, 47, 51, 55, 56, 57, 58, 62, 63, 64, 66, 67, 68—a total of twenty-eight

Chapter 3: Shlokas numbered 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 19, 20, 25, 27, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39, 40, 42—a total of nineteen

Chapter 4: Shlokas numbered 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29—a total of eighteen

Chapter 5: Shlokas numbered 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 18, 24, 26, 27, 28—a total of eleven

Chapter 6: Shlokas numbered 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 19, 20, 21, 26, 28, 29, 34, 35, 36, 43, 44, 45—a total of twenty-one

Chapter 7: Shlokas numbered 3, 7, 19, 21, 25—a total of five

Chapter 8: Shlokas numbered 6, 22—a total of two

Chapter 9: Shlokas numbered 26, 27, 32—a total of three

Chapter 10: Shlokas numbered 20, 26—a total of two

Chapter 11: Shlokas numbered 6, 10, 11, 12, 41, 42—a total of six

Chapter 12: Shloka numbered 3—a total of one

Chapter 13: Shlokas numbered 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 25—a total of ten

Chapter 14: Shloka numbered 5—a total of one

Chapter 15: Shloka numbered 15—a total of one

Chapter 16: Shlokas numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 21—a total of twelve

Chapter 17: Shlokas numbered 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19—a total of eleven

Chapter 18: Shlokas numbered 5, 41, 42, 43, 44, 47, 66, 78—a total of eight.

The shlokas I have quoted are not uniformly spread across the eighteen chapters. However, with a total of 175 shlokas quoted and their translations given, that's 25 per cent of the total number. Hence, you should have a fair idea of what the Bhagavad Gita contains. This is, of course, no substitute for reading the Bhagavad Gita in the original Sanskrit, aided by translations and commentaries. But like much else in life, it will give you what you choose to take from it. It can be an aid in your personal *arohana*. You can choose to ignore it, criticize it, or vivisect it. The Bhagavad Gita doesn't suffer in the process, you do. It can change your life, if you so choose, as it has changed the lives of others. There is a famous quote by Francis Bacon, to the effect that some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed and some to be chewed and digested. The Bhagavad Gita is not one of those books. It is a book to be lived. However, it is your life and you make what you want of it. That is your dharma and your karma.

It is your life, your progress and your regress.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An acknowledgement should start with a confession. This book wasn't my idea. The seed wasn't mine, though I helped the seed germinate. Having translated the Bhagavad Gita twice, in two versions, I thought, that was that. The Bhagavad Gita was for me to internalize. There were plenty of others doing the dissemination work. Rupa Publications had the seed of the idea and the wonderful editorial team at Rupa Publications efficiently ensured the germinated seed became a plant. I would hesitate to call it a tree. The idea was simple. How about Bhagavad Gita for the Millennial? What message does the Bhagavad Gita have for the younger generation? This was an interesting question.

There is no dearth of translations, commentaries and discourses on the Bhagavad Gita, in multiple languages. Almost inevitably, they follow the linear chapter-wise progression. Alternatively, they are dumbed down and often leave the reader none the wiser. To appreciate the Bhagavad Gita, one needs to understand Krishna. One needs to understand the broader context of other texts. One has to recognize the beauty of the Sanskrit language. And most important of all, one has to comprehend one's own self. Therefore, this book has taken a completely different tack, seeking to anticipate some questions the young might have about the Bhagavad Gita.

This book is not intended as a translation, deliberately so. At worst, those who read it will be better informed. At best, they will be catalysed to read a complete translation and the complete Sanskrit text, and then search internally within themselves.

I have never believed in showing a draft manuscript to a large number of individuals. In my experience, the suggestions received are so many that if you accept them, you will have to junk the entire manuscript. My dear friend, Abhinav Agarwal, extremely interested in our texts, took time off from his literary and professional pursuits to give the manuscript a

meticulous read. I have incorporated almost all of his suggestions, and the manuscript has improved. Another dear friend, Harsh Chaturvedi, scientist, professor and entrepreneur, turned part-time dilettante designer, did the remarkable design work for this book. He too had suggestions, again duly incorporated. A third friend, Veni Raj, also gave detailed comments, some of which I could factor in. Thank you Abhinav, Harsh and Veni. In your own different ways, the three of you wanted me to write a completely different book.

However, this book is not for the likes of Abhinav, Harsh and Veni. It is for the millennial. Hence, this book is dedicated to our daughter-in-law and our son, Shubhi and Vinayak, in the hope that they get their friends to read it. Boosting sales and royalties isn't the primary objective. The primary objective is to trigger internal reflection and self-realization and discover their destinies.

I should not have suggested it was a conscious decision on my part to write this book. I was merely the instrument. I was destined to write it.

मूकं करोति वाचालं पङ्गुं लङ्घयते गिरिं।
यत्कृपा तमहं वन्दे परमानन्द माधवम्॥

He is the one who makes the dumb speak eloquently. He is the one who makes the lame climb mountains. Everything is because of his compassion. I prostrate myself before Madhava, the supreme bliss.

Bibek Debroy
Delhi, 19 May 2020