

The Bhagavad Gita
for Daily Living
by Eknath Easwaran

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Contents

Preface: A Living Tree	vi
Introduction: The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living	xiv
The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living	1
Chapter One: The War Within	2
Chapter Two: Self-Realization	53
Bibliography	150

To my Teacher
EKNATH CHIPPU KUNCHI AMMAL
my Grandmother & my Playmate

Preface: A Living Tree

THIS practical commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, one of the greatest scriptures of the world, has grown out of the weekly talks given by Sri Eknath Easwaran¹ to a group of his devoted students and friends in Berkeley. The talks, beginning in May 1968, have been carefully recorded and transcribed weekly with the help of many members of Easwaran's āshram, or spiritual family. The transcribed lectures were then compiled and edited under Easwaran's close supervision.

The Gita class, like all of Easwaran's classes, is primarily a preparation and inspiration for the

¹ *Easwaran* is the given name by which he is known among his friends; *Eknath* is the name of his ancestral family. *Sri* is used in India as a respectful form of address.

practice of meditation as well as a commentary on a particular scripture. Group meditation follows the hour-long talk, in which Easwaran usually covers one or two verses from the Gita. In these impromptu talks, he may apply the verse to the biggest challenges facing the world today or direct his comments to solving the personal problem of a friend in the audience. But whether talking about local incidents in Berkeley or international issues, his unchanging purpose is to inspire his listeners to practice the Gita in their daily life and to make the Gita a driving force in their consciousness. The purpose of this book is to enable Easwaran's readers, also, to translate the timeless values of the Gita into their daily living through the practice of meditation.

Easwaran began studying Sanskrit, the language of the ancient Hindu scriptures, at the age of ten in his village school in Kerala state, India. He also studied Sanskrit at his ancestral Shiva temple under a priest from a community

which is well known in India for its pure Sanskrit tradition. Thoroughly familiar with the Gita in the original Sanskrit, Easwaran is also perfectly at home in English, though Malayalam is his mother tongue. In interpreting the scriptures, however, he relies on neither his Sanskrit nor his English scholarship, but on his experience in meditation and his personal practice of the spiritual life. He grew up in a large joint family in the matrilineal tradition of Kerala, and he considers his mother's mother, the flower of the Eknath family, his spiritual teacher.

It is said that every spiritual teacher has a particular context in which he or she flourishes best. Easwaran is an educator. Formerly, he would say, it was education for scholarship, education for degrees; now it is education for living. Before he came to the United States he was chairman of the Department of English at the University of Nagpur and was devoted to his students and the literature he taught them. After coming to this country on the Fulbright

exchange program in 1959, Easwaran began giving talks on meditation and the spiritual life, and the response was so great that in 1961 he established the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation in Berkeley to carry on his work of teaching meditation. Since that time, except for one return to India, he has been giving ongoing classes each week on the practice of meditation and commenting on the writings of the great mystics of all religions, including the *Yogasūtras* of Patanjali, the *Little Flowers* of St. Francis, the writings of Meister Eckhart, the Upanishads, the *Bhaktisūtras* of Narada, the Dhammapada of the Buddha, the Sermon on the Mount, Thomas a Kempis's *Of the Imitation of Christ*, and the Bhagavad Gita. He also teaches courses on meditation and on Mahatma Gandhi for the University of California Extension, Berkeley. In Nagpur, he likes to tell us laughingly, he had a reputation for always dragging Sri Ramakrishna into his lectures on Shakespeare and Shaw. Now, in these talks on the Gita, it is

Shakespeare who illustrates the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and St. Francis. The content has changed, but the context in which Easwaran flourishes cannot be very different: a small but extremely devoted group, perhaps eighty to a hundred, mostly young people of the sort who gravitate to a university town, gathered around in a semicircle to drink in the words of a man who is talking not about something he has read or something he has thought out, but about something he has experienced in his own life.

So this is a very special kind of book. Easwaran likes to say that it has grown like a tree because it issues directly from his life, which is so completely rooted in the Gita that every day he gains a deeper understanding of its teachings during even the most commonplace experiences: sharing ice cream with the āshram children in Santa Rosa, walking with friends down Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, watching a mime with his wife in San Francisco's Union Square. Every Tuesday

night in class this tree would flower, and we would hear these incidents retold as precise, profound illustrations of the Gita's applicability to our modern world. You can follow these incidents in this book, week by week, and at the same time you can trace the growth of the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation itself: the long months of looking for an āshram site, the building and remodeling when Ramagiri Ashram was acquired, the arrival of Easwaran's mother and nieces from India. The result is a living document which, as Easwaran says, is still growing even now, and which will continue to grow as it is read and absorbed by others into their own lives.

Easwaran has chosen to comment on the eighteen chapters of the Gita in three volumes, each volume covering six chapters. It is said that these three parts of the Gita illustrate the profound truth of the Upanishads, *Tat tvam asi*: "That thou art." The first six chapters are an exposition of *tvam*, 'thou,' the Ātman, and reveal

the nature of our real, eternal Self. The second six chapters concern *Tat*, 'That': Brahman, the supreme Reality underlying all creation. The last six chapters explain *asi*, 'is,' the relationship between *tvam* and *Tat*: the identity of the Self within and the supreme Reality, which unites all existence into one whole. The Gita develops this truth, "That thou art," in practical terms: by discovering our real Self, we realize the indivisible unity of life and become united with the Divine Ground of existence.

Easwaran would like to convey his appreciation to everyone who has helped with this book, including those who have attended the Gita talks with sustained enthusiasm over the years. He wishes to express his deep love to all the members of his spiritual family who have assisted in translating, recording, transcribing, editing, and printing this commentary on the Gita.

In turn we, the editors, speaking for everyone who has helped, feel that working on this book

has been a great privilege. Nachiketa, the student in the Katha Upanishad, tells Yama, “A teacher of this, another like you, is not to be found. No other boon is equal to this at all.” The combination of enlightenment and practical, effective teaching in these pages is rare indeed, difficult to find in the modern world.

—The Editors

Introduction: The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living

THERE is no significant problem in life which cannot be referred to the Bhagavad Gita for a perfect solution. The Gita is one of the most powerful of the Sanskrit scriptures of ancient India, but in my eyes it is neither philosophy nor theology, metaphysics nor poetry. It is a practical manual for daily living in any age, in any religious tradition, and my commentary is an attempt to apply its teachings specifically to the problems facing us in modern life.

Today there is an urgent need for such a manual. We see this reflected in our newspapers, magazines, books, movies, and television programs, but most of all in our daily living. Life

has never seemed more futile. In spite of all our technological advances and material prosperity, we have no peace of mind and live in fear and anger in the midst of increasing violence. We are caught in the lurid dream that the pursuit of pleasure will lead us to joy, the pursuit of profit will lead us to security, and most of us have no other purpose in life than this driving urge to bring about our own private fulfillment even if it is at the expense of other persons, races, or countries.

The Bhagavad Gita shows us how we can awaken from this dream. In Sanskrit, the language of the Gita, the underlying Reality of life is called by a simple but very powerful name: *advaita*, 'not two.' In the words of a lovable mystic of modern India, Meher Baba, "You and I are not 'we'; you and I are One." There is no division, no fragmentation in life at all; no matter how much we may appear to differ on the surface, the welfare of each one of us is inseparable from the welfare of all others.

Even on the level of the body, we know that in cancer the whole organism is eventually destroyed when even a single cell begins to pursue its own course independently of the rest. Similarly, the Bhagavad Gita tells us, you and I cannot fulfill ourselves by going our own way. We can find lasting fulfillment only by contributing to the joy and fulfillment of others, in which our own joy and fulfillment are included. This is not a philosophical platitude, but a practical principle which we must learn to live by if our civilization is to survive.

Every mystic will interpret the scriptures in accordance with the urgent needs of the times. Though the Bhagavad Gita is timeless, it too must be interpreted in accordance with the needs of the times—the *yugadharma* in Sanskrit, the 'special law of the age.' In commenting on the Gita, I always stress the indivisible unity of life because this is the need of our time. I do not stop with the family of man, but extend this unity to all life and to the environment as well.

It is the urgent need of our time to recognize the unity of all forms of life, and the intimate relationship between water, earth, air, plants, and all creatures. I am a vegetarian not only because my ancestors were, but also because I perceive this unity. Ecologists have begun to tell us that there is an interpenetrating relationship among all things which we can violate only at our peril. Jacques Cousteau, who has devoted his life to studying the oceans of the earth, tells us: "We forget that all life-cycles are one. Environment is one too. There is no such thing as an environment of a single species, of man for example." Spiritual living and sound ecological practice go together. A vegetarian diet respects this partnership among all forms of life and meets man's nutritional needs with a minimum demand on the earth's resources.

Salvation, Self-realization, *nirvāna*, *moksha*—these are just different words for the same discovery of the unity of all life. This is what we have come into life to accomplish, and until we

have accomplished this, we have not attained fulfillment. Even one person attaining this goal elevates the entire consciousness of mankind. As Philo of Alexandria said: "Households, cities, countries, and nations have enjoyed great happiness when a single individual has taken heed of the Good and Beautiful. Such men not only liberate themselves; they fill those they meet with a free mind." In the Hindu spiritual tradition there is an unbroken continuity of illumined men and women who have verified the supreme goal in their lives. There is always someone with us in India to embody the ideals of spiritual living, and through their personal life such people are able to inspire those around them to follow the supreme goal. When they write a commentary on the scriptures, it is in the light of their own experience and enables us to practice their teachings in our daily life.

My own approach to the spiritual life appeals to many men and women today, partly because I have not retired from the world—I

live very much as a family man, a good husband, son, and friend—but also because I have tried to combine the best of West and East. I live together with forty friends at our āshram, or spiritual community, and though I have heavy responsibilities in guiding our work, I take time for recreation. I go with friends to the theater; I am fond of Western and Indian classical music; I like to take the children to the ice cream parlor and the dogs to the beach for a run. But perhaps what appeals most deeply is that I understand the difficulties of living in the modern world. Before taking to meditation, in my ignorance of the unity of life, I too committed most of the mistakes that even sensitive people commit today. As a result, I understand how easy it is to make those mistakes, and I know how to guide and support those who are trying to learn a wiser way of living.

I am a believer in the little man and do not look to governments and corporations to set the world right. In India, the tropical sun dries

up almost all vegetation during the hot season, and a shade tree is a precious shelter from the deadening heat. The leaves of the tamarind tree are very small, but they are packed so closely together that they give better shade than the large leaves of the banana tree. My Grandmother, my spiritual teacher, used to point to the tamarind tree and remind me that a large number of little people, working together closely, can accomplish much more than a few big people. The Lord within, whether we call him Krishna, Christ, the Buddha, or Allah, is the source of all power, and when we live for others in accordance with the unity of all life this power flows into our hands, enabling us to take on the biggest problems facing the modern world. In Hindu mythology, Ganesha, the elephant god, is the symbol of the Lord's power. The elephant is a huge, strong creature, but very gentle. Often he does not know his own strength. His eyes are so small that in India we say he thinks he is only a small creature, not

capable of much. He never knows his own size. My Gita commentary is aimed at ordinary men and women who think they are small, who do not realize their real stature.

Even if it takes us a whole lifetime to learn to practice the teachings of the Gita, we shall have made a valuable contribution in life. You and I can make a contribution to the spiritual evolution of humanity by learning to resolve the terrible civil war described vividly in the Gita. This war is continually raging within every one of us, and the two armies in conflict are all that is selfish in us pitted against all that is selfless in us. It is a lifelong struggle between the demonic and the divine.

The Bhagavad Gita, which is found in the Hindu epic the *Mahābhārata*, is the most influential scripture to come down the ages in India. It is the quintessence of the Upanishads, giving us their perennial wisdom in a manner that can be systematically practiced. The Upanishads, which come at the end of the

Vedas and are among the oldest, most revered Hindu scriptures, contain flashing insights into the nature of life and death. The Gita gives order to the insights of the Upanishads and tells us how to undertake spiritual disciplines to become aware of the supreme Reality always.

My surmise is that the Gita was originally an Upanishad which has been inserted into the *Mahābhārata*, its first chapter serving as a bridge between the epic story and the upanishadic teaching in chapters two through eighteen. Perhaps this interpretation cannot be substantiated by scholarship, but in the traditional invocation to the Gita we find this verse

*Sarvo 'panishado gāvo
 dogdhā gopālanandanah
 Pārtho vatsah sudhīr bhoktā
 dugdham gītāmritam mahat*

The Upanishads are the cows

milked by Gopāla, the son of Nanda,
 and Arjuna is the calf.
Wise and pure men drink the milk,
the supreme, immortal nectar of the Gita

The Gita also uses the dialogue form of the Upanishads and is especially similar to the Katha Upanishad, where Yama, the King of Death, teaches the teenager Nachiketa how to attain immortality through Self-realization. In the Gita, the dialogue is between Sri Krishna (a full incarnation of Vishnu, the Preserver in the Hindu Trinity) and Arjuna, a young prince who represents you and me. Arjuna is a man of action, living in the midst of society and confronting essentially the same problems that challenge us today. His friend and spiritual teacher, Sri Krishna, is the Lord of Love who dwells in the depths of our consciousness. He is the Ātman, our real Self.

To practice the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita no amount of intellectual study can be of

much help, because intellectual knowledge, by its very nature, has little power to transform character, conduct, and consciousness. Meditation is the mighty instrument which enables us to bring the timeless teachings of the Gita into our life, day by day, step by step.

In the Hindu scriptures meditation is called *Brahmavidyā*, the supreme science, in which all human desires are completely fulfilled. If we practice meditation sincerely, systematically, and with sustained enthusiasm, our physical and emotional problems find their solution, all of our artistic and creative capacities come to full maturity, and we are able to contribute to the welfare of our family and community. We live in the world as integral members of our society, and by transforming ourselves, we transform those with whom we live. This is joyful living; it is not running away from problems but facing problems with a quiet confidence and unflinching insight that come to us day by day in the practice of meditation.

In order to bring the teachings of the Gita into our daily lives and to practice meditation, we must observe the simple rules of right living. On the strength of my own small spiritual experience, let me indicate here the eight-point program which I have found extremely useful in my own life. This body of disciplines, which can enable us to fulfill the supreme goal of life, Self-realization, can be followed by every person capable of some resolution, some endurance, and some sense of dedication.

16

The Eightfold Path

1. *Meditation on a Passage.* First comes the practice of meditation. You begin by devoting half an hour every morning as early as convenient to the practice of meditation. Do not increase this half-hour period, but if you want to meditate more, have half an hour in the evening also.

Have a room in your home for meditation, or a special corner, and keep it as austere as

possible. A quiet, cool, well-ventilated room is best. Have pictures of the great spiritual teachers if this appeals to you.

If you want to sit in a straight-back chair, one with arms is best; or sit cross-legged on the carpet. Sit with spinal column erect, and eyes gently closed. As concentration deepens you may begin to relax and fall asleep; if so, draw yourself up and move away from your back support so that you can keep the spine, neck, and head in a straight line.

Have an inspirational passage memorized, such as the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, the second or twelfth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, the Twenty-third Psalm, the first chapter of the Dhammapada of the Buddha, the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, or a selection from the Upanishads. Go through the words of the passage in your mind as slowly as you can, letting each word drop singly into your consciousness. Do not follow any association of ideas, but keep to the words of the inspirational

passage. When distractions come, do not resist them, but try to give more and more attention to the words of the prayer. If you find that your mind has wandered away completely, go back to the first word of the prayer and begin again. Keep adding to your repertoire of inspirational passages from the scriptures of all religions to prevent dryness in meditation.

The secret of meditation is that you become what you meditate on. When you use the second chapter of the Gita in meditation, you are driving the words deeper and deeper into your consciousness, so that one day, perhaps after many years, they will become an integral part of your consciousness.

2. *Repetition of a Mantram.* *Japam* is the silent repetition of the mantram, or Holy Name, in the mind.

The popular etymology of the Sanskrit word *mantram* is from *manas*, 'mind,' and *tri*, 'to cross over': "that which enables us to cross the tempestuous sea of the mind." Every religion

has its mantram. The very name of Jesus is a mantram; so is *Hail Mary*, which calls on the Divine Mother whose children we all are. *Om mani padme hum* is a great Buddhist mantram; *mani* means 'jewel'—the Self—and *padme*, 'the lotus of the heart.' Jews may use the *Shema* or *Barukh attah Adonai*, 'Blessed art thou, O Lord'; Muslims repeat the name of Allah or *Bismillāh ir-Rahmān ir-Rahīm*, 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.' And one of the oldest, simplest mantrams in India is *Rama*, from the root *ram*, 'to rejoice,' signifying the source of all joy.

When you are angry, afraid, or anxious, repeat the mantram to still the agitation rising in your mind. Anger and fear are power rising within us, and by the repetition of the Holy Name we can put anger and fear to work, harnessing them for the benefit of ourselves and others rather than allowing them to use us destructively.

At bedtime, repeat the mantram in your mind until you fall asleep. In the morning you will feel refreshed in body and mind.

Whenever you get a moment, while waiting for a bus or while walking, use this time to repeat the mantram. Boredom is a great source of problems to people who do not know what to do with their time. We may smoke, for example, just because we do not know what to do with the odds and ends of time in our day.

The mind is very much like the restless trunk of an elephant. In India elephants often walk in religious processions which wind through the streets of the town on their way to the temple. The trunk of the elephant is a restless thing, always moving, and as the temple elephant is taken through the narrow streets of the bazaar, it is usually tempted by the coconuts, bananas, and other produce displayed in the stalls on either side. As it walks, if the shopkeeper doesn't watch, it picks up a coconut and puts it in its mouth. There is a loud crack, and that is

the last of the coconut. Then from the next stall it takes a whole bunch of bananas. It doesn't peel them, but just puts the whole bunch inside, and it's gone. But the wise mahout, the man in charge of the elephants, knows their habits, so as the procession begins he gives the elephant a short bamboo stick to hold in its trunk. The elephant holds the bamboo firmly and walks through the streets without confiscating anyone's property.

This is what we do when we repeat the mantram: we slowly give a mantram-stick to the mind, and instead of wanting to smoke or overeat, it has something to hold on to. Gradually, this makes the mind firm, secure, steadfast, and proof against tension.

3. *Slowing Down.* Millions in our modern world suffer because they are constantly pushed and hurried. Hurry makes us tense and causes us to make mistakes and do a poor job. The remedy for hurrying is to get up earlier, so that we can begin the day without tension and

set a slow, leisurely pace for the day. When we are concentrated and slow we do not make mistakes; we do a much better job, which in the long run is much more economical than hurrying and making mistakes. In order to slow down we may need to eliminate some unnecessary activities from our day.

4. *One-Pointed Attention.* The practice of meditation is a systematic exercise in concentration, which will finally become a permanent, spontaneous state. It is a great aid to meditation if you practice being one-pointed during your day. Give your complete attention to whatever you are doing; particularly in conversation, give your complete attention to the person with whom you are talking. After much practice, you should be able to make your mind one-pointed, concentrating on whatever task is at hand.

Almost all of us suffer from a mind which is many-pointed, and we are usually not able to bring all our concentration to bear on a given

problem or task. For example, background music while eating, while studying, while working, prevents us from being fully aware of what we are eating, studying, or working at. Eating while watching a movie curtails our capacity to appreciate the movie, because the mind is two-pointed. When we do only one thing at a time, we are healing the divisions in our consciousness, and when we can give our complete attention to another person, he cannot help but respond by giving his complete attention to us.

5. *Training the Senses.* This does not mean sense-negation or sense-denial but training the senses to be obedient servants. We begin to train the senses by exercising discriminating restraint in our choice of movies, television programs, books, and magazines, and by eating nourishing food in temperate quantities rather than things that appeal to our taste but have no nutritional value. It is good to have a light meal in the evening and our heaviest meal at

breakfast and to eat plenty of fresh vegetables and fruits. Avoid overcooked, deep-fried, strongly flavored, and heavily spiced foods.

The training of the senses takes a long time, but finally it will enable us to have mastery over our deepest drives, our strongest powers. When the senses are trained, the body becomes healthy, strong, and beautiful.

6. *Putting Others First.* When we go after our own pleasure and profit, dwelling on ourselves and ignoring the needs of those around us, we are constricting our consciousness and stunting our growth. People who are driven by anger, for example, are usually those who are full of self-will, who cannot put the other person first. Seldom do they have lasting relationships; seldom are they able to live at peace with themselves and with those around them. But the person who has little or no self-will is secure and by his calmness and steadfastness is able to help those who are agitated to become calm. In the home it is particularly the privilege of the

woman by her personal example to help the members of her family to be patient, enduring, and forgiving. I place so much emphasis on the family context because it gives us countless opportunities every day for expanding our consciousness by reducing our self-will or separateness. This need not mean following the wishes of the other person always, but when it seems necessary to differ, this must be done tenderly and without the slightest trace of resentment or retaliation.

20

7. *Spiritual Fellowship*. It is of great importance for all of us to draw inspiration from someone who is able to interpret the sacred scriptures and the great mystics in the light of his own personal experience. It is a difficult task to practice meditation for many years, day in and day out, and we all need the support and companionship of people meditating together. This is the great advantage of a spiritual community, or āshram, where those dedicated to the practice of meditation live together with

a spiritual teacher. In your own home, it is very good if members of the family can meditate together.

8. *Spiritual Reading.* My suggestion here is to read the scriptures and great mystics of all religions. If you want to know about the mystical tradition, go direct to the great mystics, rather than relying on books about mysticism. This devotional reading can be an inspiration and encouragement on the spiritual path, but even here it is better to read a few books slowly and well than many books quickly. All knowledge is within, and the practice of meditation enables us to draw upon this knowledge. Through carefully selected spiritual reading we can be inspired by the spiritual awareness of the mystics of all religions and ages.

If we want to make the discovery that will fulfill all our desires and establish us in abiding joy, bringing to our life limitless love, wisdom, and beauty, then the mystics have described the path for us to follow. By following these

simple rules of right living and practicing meditation regularly, we can learn to fulfill the supreme goal of life, which is to discover experientially that all life is one.

The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living

Chapter One: The War Within

23

धृतराष्ट्र उवाच ।

धर्मक्षेत्रे कुरुक्षेत्रे समवेता युयुत्सवः ।

मामकाः पाण्डवाश्चैव किमकुर्वत सञ्जय ॥१॥

DHRITARASHTRA:²

1. *O Sanjaya, tell me what happened at Kurukshetra, on the field of dharma, where my family and the Pandavas gathered to fight.*

THE GITA," SAYS Mahatma Gandhi, "is not a historical discourse. A physical illustration is often needed to drive home a spiritual truth. It is the description not of war between cousins,

² Dhritarāshtra, a blind king, is the father of the forces of darkness. His name means "he who has usurped the kingdom."

but between two natures in us—the Good and the Evil.” Volumes have been written about the battle which is said to have taken place on the field of Kurukshetra, located north of Delhi, but for the spiritual aspirant, the battle described in the Bhagavad Gita is not limited to a particular historical setting. Sri Krishna’s message is as valid today as it was centuries ago, and it will continue to be so tomorrow, for it describes the eternal truth of life that the fiercest battle we must wage is against all that is selfish, self-willed, and separate in us. Today when the world is being torn asunder by war, when violence stalks our streets and invades our homes, when anger disrupts our relationships and separateness pervades our consciousness, Sri Krishna’s immortal words, given to us in the Gita, are of urgent practical value. The violence we see about us is a reflection of the anger and self-will burning deep within us. Most of us carry a conflagration around with us in the depths of our consciousness, and many of us

are skilled tacticians in guerilla warfare right in our own homes. The war the mystics of all the world's great religions talk about is not the one erupting in the Middle East or in Southeast Asia that makes newspaper headlines; it is the one erupting from the fierce self-will afflicting all of us, estranging individuals, families, communities, races, and nations.

Once I was on a train going from Delhi to Simla, high on the Himālayas, and on the way we passed through Kurukshetra, the historical battlefield of the Bhagavad Gita. My fellow passengers were talking about the tremendous battle which took place there, and when we arrived at the scene, they eagerly climbed out to have a look. To me there was no need to disembark, because I already had an inkling that the real battlefield in the Gita was right inside each passenger on the train. The language of battle is often found in the scriptures, for it conveys the strenuous, long, drawn-out campaign we must wage to free ourselves from

the tyranny of the ego, the cause of all our suffering and sorrow. By setting before us the inspiring ideal of the victorious man or woman as one who has conquered himself or herself, the mystics urge us on to fight this battle and eradicate all that is selfish in us.

How can we ordinary men and women, living in the midst of our family and society, achieve such a victory? In the Gita Sri Krishna gives us the precious jewel of spiritual wisdom, of immediate practical value to everyone's life. He tells us how we can learn to fight the battle against self-will and separateness through the practice of meditation and its allied disciplines, and he shows us how in our own daily lives we can gain the will and the wisdom to transform anger into compassion, fear into courage, and greed into tireless striving for the welfare of others.

सञ्जय उवाच ।

दृष्ट्वा तु पाण्डवानीकं व्यूढं दुर्योधनस्तदा ।
 आचार्यमुपसङ्गम्य राजा वचनमब्रवीत् ॥ २ ॥
 पश्यैतां पाण्डुपुत्राणामाचार्य महतीं चमूम् ।
 व्यूढां द्रुपदपुत्रेण तव शिष्येण धीमता ॥ ३ ॥
 अत्र शूरा महेष्वासा भीमार्जुनसमा युधि ।
 युयुधानो विराटश्च द्रुपदश्च महारथः ॥ ४ ॥
 धृष्टकेतुश्चेकितानः काशिराजश्च वीर्यवान् ।
 पुरुजित्कुन्तिभोजश्च शैब्यश्च नरपुङ्गवः ॥ ५ ॥
 युधामन्युश्च विक्रान्त उत्तमौजाश्च वीर्यवान् ।
 सौभद्रो द्रौपदेयाश्च सर्व एव महारथाः ॥ ६ ॥
 अस्माकं तु विशिष्टा ये तान्निबोध द्विजोत्तम ।
 नायका मम सैन्यस्य संज्ञार्थं तान्ब्रवीमि ते ॥ ७ ॥
 भवान्भीष्मश्च कर्णश्च कृपश्च समितिञ्जयः ।
 अश्वत्थामा विकर्णश्च सौमदत्तिस्तथैव च ॥ ८ ॥
 अन्ये च बहवः शूरा मदर्थे त्यक्तजीविताः ।
 नानाशस्त्रप्रहरणाः सर्वे युद्धविशारदाः ॥ ९ ॥
 अपर्याप्तं तदस्माकं बलं भीष्माभिरक्षितम् ।
 पर्याप्तं त्विदमेतेषां बलं भीमाभिरक्षितम् ॥ १० ॥
 अयनेषु च सर्वेषु यथाभागमवस्थिताः ।
 भीष्ममेवाभिरक्षन्तु भवन्तः सर्व एव हि ॥ ११ ॥

SANJAYA³

2. *Having surveyed the forces of the Pandavas arrayed for battle, Duryodhana,⁴ the prince, approached his teacher and spoke.*

3. *“O my teacher, look at this mighty army of the Pandavas; it has been assembled by your gifted disciple, the son of Drupada.*

26

4–6. *“There are heroic warriors and great archers who are the equals of Bhīma and Arjuna: Yuyudhāna, the mighty Virāta, Drupada, Dhrishtaketu, Cekitāna, the valiant king of Kāshī, Purujit, Kuntibhoja, the great leader Shaibya, the powerful Yudhāmanyu, the valiant Uttamaujas, the son of Subhadrā, and the sons of Draupadī; all these command mighty chariots.*

7–8. *“You who are the best of the brahmins, listen to the names of those who are distinguished among us: Bhīshma, Karna, and the victorious Kripa; Ashvatthāma, Vikarna, and the son of Somadatta.*

3 The entire dialogue of the Bhagavad Gita is reported to us by Sanjaya, who sees what is taking place on the battlefield within through his power of divine vision.

4 Duryodhana, eldest son of Dritarāshtra, is the leader of the forces of darkness.

9. *"There are many others, too, heroes giving up their lives for my sake. They are all proficient in war and armed with a variety of weapons.*
10. *"Our army is unlimited and commanded by Bhīshma; theirs is small and commanded by Bhīma.*
11. *"Let everyone take his proper place and stand firm supporting Bhīshma."*

RELIGION is realization of the unity of life; this is the supreme purpose for which we have come into the human context. Our intellectual orientation, useful though it is in helping us solve some of our problems, tends to make us forget that the scriptures of the great religions are meant to be personally experienced in daily life. I appreciate the scholarly editions of the Gita, the Bible, or the Dhammapada that abound in footnotes and appendices, but I always ask myself: will this approach show me how to translate the teachings of Sri Krishna, Jesus the Christ, or the Compassionate

Buddha into my own life? Will it prepare me to undertake the long, exhausting war I have come into this world to win?

Sri Krishna insists we do the actual fighting in this battle ourselves, but with his infinite mercy, he outlines the battle plan and gives us the maps, weapons, and strategies necessary to win. The first tip the Gita gives us is on the nature of the contesting armies, the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The Kauravas are usually identified with the forces of darkness that bring about death and despair, and the Pandavas with the forces of light which bring abiding joy and unshakable security. The ancient Sanskrit scriptures throw a flood of light on this dichotomy by describing it as a choice between *preya* and *shreya*. *Preya*, the passing pleasure that seems pleasing to the senses but soon fades into its opposite, is what we choose when we indulge in injurious physical habits or retaliate against others. *Shreya*, the good that leads to lasting welfare for the whole, is what

we choose by cultivating healthy habits, by bringing conflicting parties together, and by putting the happiness of those around us first. These two conflicting forces are very much in evidence in the world today: on the one hand we have made great strides towards eliminating poverty and disease, but on the other hand, we have stockpiled sufficient arms to kill every man, woman, and child on the face of the earth several times over. We seek peace and freedom for all, but we are letting the selfish pursuit of personal profit and pleasure destroy our families, our communities, and even our society. As Sri Ramakrishna, the great saint who lived in India in the last century, was fond of saying, "If you want to go east, don't walk towards the west." Such is the confusion of our lives that we have forgotten there is this choice to be made at all, and in fact we no longer know whether we are running east or west.

Another set of beautiful Sanskrit terms for describing the perennial opposition between

the forces that elevate us and those that bring about our downfall is *nitya* and *anitya*. *Nitya* refers to that which is eternal and unchanging, and this is what we seek by forgiving those who harm us and supporting those who differ from us. *Anitya* is that which fades away and brings suffering in its wake, and this is what we seek when we give in to an angry impulse or do what leads to self-aggrandizement at the expense of our family, community, and society. When we fight others, whether physically or in the mind, we harm them and ourselves, but when we fight all that is base and self-willed in us, we bring lasting joy to everyone. This is a central theme in all the great scriptures. We can all learn to conquer hatred through love by drawing on the power released through the practice of meditation to throw all our weight, all our energy, and all our will on the side of what is patient, forgiving, and selfless in ourselves and others.

तस्य सञ्जनयन्हर्षं कुरुवृद्धः पितामहः ।
 सिंहनादं विनद्योच्चैः शङ्खं दध्मौ प्रतापवान् ॥१२॥
 ततः शङ्खाश्च भेर्यश्च पणवानकगोमुखाः ।
 सहसैवाभ्यहन्यन्त स शब्दस्तुमुलोऽभवत् ॥१३॥
 ततः श्वेतैर्हयैर्युक्ते महति स्यन्दने स्थितौ ।
 माधवः पाण्डवश्चैव दिव्यौ शङ्खौ प्रदध्मतुः ॥१४॥

12. Then the powerful Bhīshma, the grandsire, oldest of all the Kurus, in order to cheer Duryodhana, roared like a lion and blew his conch horn.

13. And after Bhīshma there was a tremendous noise of conch and cowhorns and pounding on drums.

14. Then Sri Krishna and Arjuna, who were standing in a mighty chariot yoked with white horses, blew their divine conchs.

IN this greatest of all battles between the forces of good and evil, Arjuna represents you and me, and Sri Krishna, the Lord of Love enshrined in the heart of every creature, is his

best friend, his dearest companion, and above all, his beloved teacher and guide. Sri Krishna is not someone outside us, swinging between Neptune and Uranus; he is closer to us than our body, nearer to us, as the Sufi mystics put it, than our jugular vein. The word *Krishna* comes from the Sanskrit root *krish*, 'to draw'; Krishna is the one inside us who is drawing us to himself all the time. The title *Sri* means 'Lord.' Sri Krishna is eternal and omnipresent; he is our real Self. Whether we call him the Christ, the Buddha, or Allah, he is the supreme Reality underlying consciousness and uniting all creation.

पाञ्चजन्यं हृषीकेशो देवदत्तं धनञ्जयः ।
 पौण्ड्रं दध्मौ महाशङ्खं भीमकर्मा वृकोदरः ॥ १५ ॥
 अनन्तविजयं राजा कुन्तीपुत्रो युधिष्ठिरः ।
 नकुलः सहदेवश्च सुघोषमणिपुष्पकौ ॥ १६ ॥
 काश्यश्च परमेष्वासः शिखण्डी च महारथः ।
 धृष्टद्युम्नो विराटश्च सात्यकिश्चापराजितः ॥ १७ ॥
 द्रुपदो द्रौपदेयाश्च सर्वशः पृथिवीपते ।
 सौभद्रश्च महाबाहुः शङ्खान्दध्मुः पृथक्पृथक् ॥ १८ ॥

स घोषो धार्तराष्ट्राणां हृदयानि व्यदारयत् ।
 नभश्च पृथिवीं चैव तुमुलो व्यनुनादयन् ॥ १९ ॥

15. Sri Krishna blew the conch named Pāncajanya, and Arjuna blew that called Devadatta. The mighty Bhīma blew the huge conch Paundra.

16. Yudhishtira, the king, the son of Kuntī, blew the conch Anantavijaya; Nakula and Sahadeva blew their conchs as well.⁵

17–18. The king of Kashī, the leading bowman, the great warrior Shikhandī, Dhrishtadyumna, Virāta, the invincible Sātyaki, Drupada, all the sons of Draupadī, and the son of Subhadra with the mighty arms all blew their conchs.

19. And the noise tore through the heart of Duryodhana's army. Indeed, the sound was tumultuous, echoing throughout heaven and earth.

THE tumult and confusion of warfare are the same no matter what the times or

⁵ Yudhishtira, Bhīma, Nakula, and Sahadeva are Arjuna's brothers.

circumstances, no matter who the contestants or what the issues involved. In ancient India it was the mighty bowman and the strong elephant, today it is the missile and the tank, but the dreadful disruption of life which results is the same in both cases. As the Compassionate Buddha said more than two thousand years ago, "Hatred will never cease by hatred at any time. Hatred ceases only through love. This is an eternal law." We can never bring an end to violence by using violent means; far from resolving conflicts, hostility and retaliation drive people further apart and make havoc of life.

30

The tragedy of self-will is that it leads to increasing insecurity, ill health, loneliness, and despair. This cannot but be the discouraging prognosis for those who pursue personal profit, power, prestige, and pleasure at the expense of the welfare of their family and community. In the beautiful words of St. Francis of Assisi, "It is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning

that we are pardoned." Most of us suffer from the mistaken belief that it is in grabbing that we receive, it is in venting anger that we improve our relationships, and it is in having our own way that we find fulfillment. Unfortunately happiness escapes us the more we clutch at it by manipulating those around us and accumulating more material possessions. Security is not found in a stockpile of weapons but in mutual trust and respect among individuals, races, and nations; peace is not found in asserting our rights over others but in assuring the lasting welfare of our extended circle of family and friends. This is the great insight that comes in meditation: on the spiritual path there is no possibility of defeat, for the Lord called Sri Krishna by some and the Christ by others—is in the depths of our consciousness to support us, guide us, and help us win the war against our self-will.

One of the glorious names for Sri Krishna, used here and elsewhere throughout the Gita

to remind us of the complete, unending joy lying within us, is Hrishiksha, 'he whose hair stands on end with joy.' The name used here for Arjuna should also inspire us: Dhananjaya, 'conqueror of wealth.' This is the perfect epithet for the person who meditates, for he discovers that real wealth comes from giving freely of himself to others. We do not learn to do this overnight; we do not go to sleep selfish one evening and wake up the next morning with every trace of self-will gone. The battle against the ego is a long, agonizing affair that may take our entire lifetime. When we accept this challenge, all the boredom goes out of life; every day brings new tests of our endurance, strength, and desire to win the battle. All our angry, aggressive instincts are harnessed to the effort; instead of anger using us, we control it and use it as a source of tremendous power. We can take heart from the great mystics who have successfully met this challenge. As the Buddha declared twenty-five hundred years ago: "One

man may conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men; but if another conquers himself, he is the greatest of conquerors." It is only a mystic who can understand what struggle is required to extinguish self-will, to gain the patience that will not be exhausted by any attack and the forgiveness that will bear even with those who slander him.

अथ व्यवस्थितान्दृष्ट्वा धार्तराष्ट्रान् कपिध्वजः ।

प्रवृत्ते शस्त्रसम्पाते धनुरुद्यम्य पाण्डवः ॥२०॥

हृषीकेशं तदा वाक्यमिदमाह महीपते ।

अर्जुन उवाच ।

सेनयोरुभयोर्मध्ये रथं स्थापय मेऽच्युत ॥२१॥

यावदेतान्निरीक्षेऽहं योद्धुकामानवस्थितान् ।

कैर्मया सह योद्धव्यमस्मिन् रणसमुद्यमे ॥२२॥

योत्स्यमानानवेक्षेऽहं य एतेऽत्र समागताः ।

धार्तराष्ट्रस्य दुर्बुद्धेर्युद्धे प्रियचिकीर्षवः ॥२३॥

सञ्जय उवाच ।

एवमुक्तो हृषीकेशो गुडाकेशेन भारत ।

सेनयोरुभयोर्मध्ये स्थापयित्वा रथोत्तमम् ॥२४॥

भीष्मद्रोणप्रमुखतः सर्वेषां च महीक्षिताम् ।

उवाच पार्थ पश्यैतान्समवेतान्कुरुनिति ॥२५॥
 तत्रापश्यत्स्थितान्यार्थः पितृनथ पितामहान् ।
 आचार्यान्मातुलान्भ्रातृन्पुत्रान्पौत्रान्सखींस्तथा ॥२६॥
 श्वशुरान्सुहृदश्चैव सेनयोरुभयोरपि ।
 तान्समीक्ष्य स कौन्तेयः सर्वान्बन्धूनवस्थितान् ॥२७॥
 कृपया परयाविष्टो विषीदन्निदमब्रवीत् ।
 अर्जुन उवाच ।
 दृष्ट्वेमं स्वजनं कृष्ण युयुत्सुं समुपस्थितम् ॥२८॥
 सीदन्ति मम गात्राणि मुखं च परिशुष्यति ।
 वेपथुश्च शरीरे मे रोमहर्षश्च जायते ॥२९॥

32

20–21. *Then, O Dhritarāshtra, lord of the earth, having seen your son's forces set in their places and the fighting about to begin, Arjuna spoke these words to Sri Krishna.*

ARJUNA:

21–22. *O Krishna, drive my chariot between the two armies. I want to see those who desire to fight with me. With whom will this battle be fought?*

23. *I wish to see those assembled to fight for Duryodhana, those who desire to please the evil-minded son of Dhritarāshtra by engaging in war.*

SANJAYA:

24–25. *Thus Arjuna spoke, and Sri Krishna, driving his splendid chariot between the two armies, facing Bhīshma and Drona and all the kings of the earth, said: “Arjuna, behold all the Kurus gathered together.”*

26–29. *And Arjuna, as he stood between the two armies, saw fathers and grandfathers, teachers, uncles, and brothers, sons and grandsons, in-laws and friends. Seeing his kinsmen established in opposition, Arjuna fell into confusion and mournfully spoke these words:*

ARJUNA:

O Krishna, I see my own relations here with the desire to fight, and my limbs are weak; my mouth is dry, my body is shaking, and my hair is standing on end.

○NE of the best definitions of confusion is doing what is unnecessary and failing to do what is necessary. This is our condition in life when we clash with our family and friends and

fail to fight our worst enemy, our own self-will and separateness. Arjuna is beginning to realize that the battle he must wage is against what he has always considered to be a part of himself. Faced with the task of ridding his consciousness of every trace of selfish desire, Arjuna, like you and me, moans and groans to Sri Krishna: "How can I possibly fight these people, my best pals, with whom I have painted Hastināpura red?"

We have been so conditioned to search for happiness in sense-pleasure that defying these urges appears to be a denial of life itself. Actually the opposite is true. As we progress on the spiritual path, our vision begins to clear and our passions begin to come under our control, and we discover that we have been pursuing agitation instead of joy and accumulation instead of security. The curious thing is that we are convinced we can isolate pleasure as our own private possession, although it has escaped our grasp time and again. We may have failed in the past, but the next time we

think we will succeed for sure, and we go on trying. The other day, while going for a walk, we saw two Alsatians that reminded me of our flair for chasing pleasure and profit. These two dogs were trying to catch a rainbow over a water sprinkler so they could take it home to their doghouse. One after the other they would come, jump into the spray, and snap at the rainbow hovering there. As soon as one had finished his jump, the other one would follow right on his heels as if to say, "You don't know how to do it. Let me show you," over and over again. This is what you and I do when we try to catch the rainbow that is personal pleasure, power, profit, and prestige. Even though we go through the experience many times, we do not seem able to learn from it. The Gita very compassionately says that the sooner we learn this lesson in life, the better it will be.

It is not surprising that we follow passing pleasure instead of abiding joy when we consider the extensive influence of the mass

media and the widespread use of advertising. From childhood onwards we are conditioned to believe that we are our body, senses, and mind, and that happiness lies in satisfying their whims and desires. We have become so accustomed to telling Mr. Ego "You say, I do" that the very idea of questioning his authority by training the senses and changing our attitudes makes us tremble in anxiety. In meditation we begin to suspect that the ego is really a tyrant who has usurped the throne from our real Self, called the Ātman in Sanskrit, which is the source of all wisdom and beauty in life. Once this suspicion arises, the days of the ego's tyranny are numbered, and the cloud of confusion which has blinded us begins to be dispelled.

34

गाण्डीवं संसते हस्तात्त्वक्चैव परिदह्यते ।
 न च शक्नोम्यवस्थातुं भ्रमतीव च मे मनः ॥३०॥
 निमित्तानि च पश्यामि विपरीतानि केशव ।
 न च श्रेयोऽनुपश्यामि हत्वा स्वजनमाहवे ॥३१॥

न काङ्क्षे विजयं कृष्ण न च राज्यं सुखानि च ।
किं नो राज्येन गोविन्द किं भोगैर्जीवितेन वा ॥३२॥

30. My skin is burning, and the bow Gāndīva has slipped from my hand. I am unable to stand, and my mind seems to be whirling.

31. The signs are evil for us. I do not see that any good can come from killing our relations in battle.

32. O Krishna, I do not desire victory, or a kingdom, or pleasures. Of what use is a kingdom, O Govinda,⁶ or pleasure, or even life?

ARJUNA is suffering from a very contemporary malady, paralysis of the will. This is the crux of many of our problems. We say we want to put an end to war, yet we go on making missiles, guns, tanks, and bombs, and arming other countries in the name of peace. We are alarmed about violence, yet we let our children watch hour after hour of violent television programs.

⁶ *Govinda*, a popular name for Sri Krishna, means 'leader of the cowherds.' As a young man Sri Krishna lived in a village of cowherds called Vrindāvana, and many legends are told of his pranks and exploits there.

We are concerned about pollution, but we pour pollutants by the ton into our rivers and oceans; we make the air unfit to breathe and strip the earth of irreplaceable resources. Even when we can clearly see the urgency of stopping pollution and putting an end to violence, we lack the will and the wisdom to translate our desire into effective action.

Though Arjuna deploras this state of inertia and self-pity, he is unable to shake it off. This is often our problem too; we can diagnose our shortcomings and even give a brilliant synopsis of the world's woes, but as long as our knowledge is limited to intellectual analysis, we will not have the capacity to make the world more peaceful; we will not be able to prevent pollution or even bring together estranged families and friends. It is the deeper will and wisdom which come through meditation that enable us to tap the creative resources and untiring energy lying latent in our consciousness.

Looking at the opposing army, Arjuna is plunged into confusion. His special bow, Gandiva, slips from his grasp, and his mind reels at the prospect of fighting. This confrontation comes to all of us who are in earnest about putting an end to the cause of our sorrow and suffering, our petty little personality driven by self-will. Success on the spiritual path requires the highest kind of courage we can muster, for every ounce of our strength and resolution will be tested. It was my spiritual teacher, my mother's mother, who showed me through the example of her own life that it is the nonviolent person who cannot be frightened; the violent person can always be threatened with greater violence. If you want to see real bravery, look at the person who is patient under attack, who will not retaliate, who will suffer rather than inflict suffering on others. This is the heroic ideal Jesus the Christ gives us to follow: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them

which despitefully use you, and persecute you, that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven." Sri Krishna, in his infinite grace, helps Arjuna find this source of strength within himself, just as he enables us, when we turn to him, to become patient when attacked, forbearing when provoked, and loving when hated. This is the way we grow fearless and strong enough to grapple with the grave problems that threaten our world.

येषामर्थे काङ्क्षितं नो राज्यं भोगाः सुखानि च ।
 त इमेऽवस्थिता युद्धे प्राणांस्त्यक्त्वा धनानि च ॥३३॥
 आचार्याः पितरः पुत्रास्तथैव च पितामहाः ।
 मातुलाः श्वशुराः पौत्राः श्यालाः सम्बन्धिनस्तथा ॥३४॥
 एतान्न हन्तुमिच्छामि घ्नतोऽपि मधुसूदन ।
 अपि त्रैलोक्यराज्यस्य हेतोः किं नु महीकृते ॥३५॥
 निहत्य धार्तराष्ट्रान्नः का प्रीतिः स्याज्जनार्दन ।
 पापमेवाश्रयेदस्मान्हृत्वैतानाततायिनः ॥३६॥
 तस्मान्नार्हा वयं हन्तुं धार्तराष्ट्रान्स्वबान्धवान् ।
 स्वजनं हि कथं हत्वा सुखिनः स्याम माधव ॥३७॥
 यद्यप्येते न पश्यन्ति लोभोपहतचेतसः ।

कुलक्षयकृतं दोषं मितद्रोहे च पातकम् ॥३८॥
 कथं न ज्ञेयमस्माभिः पापादस्मान्निवर्तितुम् ।
 कुलक्षयकृतं दोषं प्रपश्यद्विर्जनार्दन ॥३९॥
 कुलक्षये प्रणश्यन्ति कुलधर्माः सनातनाः ।
 धर्मे नष्टे कुलं कृत्स्नमधर्मोऽभिभवत्युत ॥४०॥
 अधर्माभिभवात्कृष्ण प्रदुष्यन्ति कुलस्त्रियः ।
 स्त्रीषु दुष्टासु वार्ष्णेय जायते वर्णसङ्करः ॥४१॥

33–34. *Those for whose sake we would desire a kingdom, or pleasures, or happiness—teachers, fathers, sons, even grandfathers, uncles, in-laws, grandsons, and others with family ties—they are engaging in this battle, renouncing their wealth and their lives.*

35. *Even if they were to kill me, O Krishna, I would not want to kill them, not even to become ruler of the three worlds. How much less for the earth alone?*

36. *O Krishna, what satisfaction could we find in killing Dhritarāshtra's sons? We would become sinners by slaying these men, even though evil.*

37. *The sons of Dhritarāshtra are related to us; therefore, we should not kill them, O Mādhava. How can we gain happiness by killing members of our own family?*

38–39. *Though they are overpowered by greed and do not see evil in the decay of the family or the sin in injuring friends, we see the evil which comes from the destruction of the family. Why shouldn't we turn away from this sin?*

40. *When a family declines, ancient traditions are destroyed. With them are lost the spiritual foundations for life, and the entire family loses its sense of unity.*

41. *O Krishna, where there is no sense of unity the women of the family become corrupt. With the corruption of the women, O Vārshneya, society is plunged into chaos.*

TO realize the unity underlying all life and live in harmony with this awareness, we do not have to quit our jobs, leave our family, drop out of school, or turn our back on

society. Living in the midst of our extended circle of family and friends provides the perfect context for learning to see the Lord in everyone, everywhere, every minute, for in these deep personal relationships we can easily forget ourselves, our comforts, and our conveniences in ensuring the joy of others. This is a straightforward way of reducing our self-will, which is the only obstacle standing between the Lord and us.

In these verses Arjuna has addressed Sri Krishna very appropriately by using two of his family names: Mādhava, 'son of the Madhu clan'; and Vārshneya, 'he who belongs to the family of the Vrishnis.' The family has always been a symbol of unity and selfless love in spite of the serious problems that have afflicted it from time to time. Arjuna's confusion over his family responsibility is ours as well, for we have let competition and self-interest tear our families apart. Husband and wife compete against each other, parents and children compete, sister

and brother compete; even the grandparents are trying to get into the act. This competitive tendency has spread from the home to the school and campus, to organizations, and of course to international relationships. It breeds distrust, suspicion, and jealousy wherever it goes. As our security increases through meditation, we find we do not need to compete, for the source of joy and wisdom is right within us. Competition has so distorted our vision that we are defensive towards even our dear ones, but as our meditation deepens, we see what lasting joy there is in trying to complete one another rather than compete against one another.

If just one person in a family takes to the spiritual life, he or she can slowly transform the home from a battleground into a citadel of strength for family and friends alike. This is particularly true when the woman takes to meditation, for she is in an advantageous position to support and inspire others with her

selfless love, patience, and forbearance. Over a period of time, her quiet example will enable her partner, parents, children, and friends to grow strong and secure. My Grandmother used to tell the girls in my ancestral family that it was their privilege to light up the home with their generosity and forgiveness; she showed them in her own personal life how everyone cannot but respond to such a woman, and how family and friends eagerly return to such a home. We should bear in mind that this concept of family loyalty and unity is not limited just to parents and children; those who deeply care for each other's welfare are a family in the best sense of the word, and it is by extending our capacity to love and support to a widening circle of friends that we transform our life into a permanent force for good in the world. Anandamayi Ma, the great woman saint of modern India whom my wife, Christine, and I have had the blessing of meeting, expresses this awareness of unity when she says: "The different organs of the

human body fulfill different functions; some more noble certainly than others, but for the good of the body they must all be cared for. In the same way, try to treat with equal love all the people with whom you have relations. Make a habit of this and soon you will perceive that all humankind is as your family. Thus the abyss between 'myself' and 'yourself' will be filled in, which is the goal of all religious worship."

सङ्करो नरकायैव कुलघ्नानां कुलस्य च ।
पतन्ति पितरो ह्येषां लुप्तपिण्डोदकक्रियाः ॥४२॥

39

42. Social chaos is hell for the family, and for those who have destroyed the family as well. It disrupts the process of spiritual evolution begun by our ancestors.

THE perennial truth expressed in the scriptures, which we can realize in our own lives, is that all creation is evolving towards the unitive state. Any sensitive person can

appreciate the grandeur of this process; just observe a hive of bees at work, or walk through a forest, or live with a selfless person, and you cannot but be profoundly moved by the way every aspect of creation can work with all the rest as a unit in perfect harmony. This truth has far-reaching application in our daily life. On the one hand, every time we violate the unity of life by venting our anger on those around us, or by harming our fellow creatures, we work against this evolution; on the other hand, every time we forgive others, do what benefits them, or alleviate the distress of any creature, we contribute towards this evolution. By striving to live in accord with this unity we bring about the fulfillment of all creation, which of course includes our own, but by going our separate ways, we obstruct the evolution of consciousness towards the unitive state.

The unity underlying life is so complete and pervasive that when we inflict suffering on the smallest creature, we injure the whole.

When we refrain from habits that harm others, when we take up jobs that relieve suffering, when we work to put an end to anger and separateness, we strengthen the whole. John Donne reminds us of this when he says, "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee."

There is nothing more important in life than learning to express this unity in all our relationships: with our family and friends, with our colleagues and fellow workers, with other communities and countries, with other races and religious groups, and with other creatures. This is the way we come to see the presence of the Lord.

दोषैरेतैः कुलघ्नानां वर्णसङ्करकारकैः ।
 उत्साद्यन्ते जातिधर्माः कुलधर्माश्च शाश्वताः ॥४३॥
 उत्सन्नकुलधर्माणां मनुष्याणां जनार्दन ।
 नरकेऽनियतं वासो भवतीत्यनुशुश्रुम ॥४४॥

43. *The timeless spiritual foundations of the family and society are destroyed by these terrible deeds which violate the unity of life.*
44. *It is said that those who have lost sight of this unity dwell in hell.*

ARJUNA is beginning to see the terrible consequences of disunity. We have a tendency to think of heaven and hell as physical domains located on some celestial map, when really they describe our state of being right here on earth. This is the practical meaning of unity and separateness in our daily living; we have a taste of heaven every time we forget ourselves in ensuring the joy of others, and we have a bitter dose of the other place when we think or behave unkindly.

Violence, war, pollution, estrangement, and insensitivity to our fellow creatures are external manifestations of the disunity seething in our consciousness. Because we live on the surface level of life we are often unaware of the anger and fear burning deep within us. It is only after practicing meditation for some years that we learn to descend into the depths of our consciousness where we can observe these negative forces at work and put an end to their disruptive activity. Right from the first days of our sādhana, the spiritual disciplines we practice begin, however slowly, to transform our character, conduct, and consciousness. When the divisiveness which has been agitating us and making life difficult begins to mend, we get immediate evidence in our daily life: our health improves, long-standing personal conflicts subside, our mind becomes clear and our intellect lucid; an unshakable sense of security and well-being follows us wherever we go, and whatever challenges loom before

us, we know we have the will and the wisdom to meet them effectively.

Unification of consciousness can turn the most ordinary of us into a spiritual force; this is the power of the unitive state that we enter in the climax of meditation, called *sāmadhi* in Sanskrit, when our heart, mind, and spirit come to rest in the Lord. Swami Ramdas, a delightful saint whom we met in his āshram in South India, summarizes this in simple, clear words: "All sādhanas are done with a view to still the mind. The perfectly still mind is universal spirit."

अहो बत महत्पापं कर्तुं व्यवसिता वयम् ।
यद्राज्यसुखलोभेन हन्तुं स्वजनमुद्यताः ॥४५॥

45. This is a great sin! We are prepared to kill our own relations out of greed for the pleasures of a kingdom.

IT is easy to see why Arjuna represents you and me so well, for with a few well-chosen

words he is able to point right to the cause of our disrupted relationships and increasing insecurity. With dismay he tells Sri Krishna how he fears the devastating consequences of not keeping in mind the unity underlying all life. For personal pleasure and profit we are willing to sacrifice the welfare of our family and friends, our society and environment. In Arjuna's time, it was greed for a kingdom; in ours it is greed for a higher salary, a prestigious home, and a partner who will always agree with our opinions. As long as we seek to be lord and master over our petty personal kingdom, we bar the door to the Lord of Love within us, and confusion and chaos reign. This is the inevitable consequence of violating the unity of life by attempting to go our own separate way.

The Bible tells us we cannot love both God and Mammon at the same time, and in the spiritual tradition of India, great sages like Sri Ramakrishna will remind us that for Rāma—the source of abiding joy—to come into our lives,

Kāma—the craving to satisfy our personal desires—must go. Our capacity for joy is so great that going after passing pleasure is like throwing a peanut in an elephant’s mouth and expecting him to be full. We are so trapped in our self-willed existence that we do not realize how clouded our judgment is and how tragically we waste the gift of life trying to acquire another car, which will pollute our environment, or enjoy an extra gourmet meal, which will add to our weight and injure our health.

The English mystic William Law describes how most of us go through life under the illusion that satisfying selfish desires can bring happiness: “A life devoted to the interests and enjoyments of this world, spent and wasted in the slavery of earthly desires, may be truly called a dream, as having all the shortness, vanity, and delusion of a dream; only with this great difference, that when a dream is over nothing is lost but fictions and fancies; but when the dream of life is ended

only by death, all that eternity is lost, for which we were brought into being." As long as we have not seen someone who has conquered all that is self-willed in himself, we will find it hard to believe that we can cast off this spell of separateness and awake to the unity of life. But in the world's great religions, we have mystic after mystic showing us that this is possible if we are willing to change the direction of our lives through the practice of meditation. In our own time we have the inspiring example of Mahatma Gandhi, who attained the unitive state and helped many others undertake the struggle against all that is selfish and separate. His real name was Mohandas K. Gandhi, but in India we prefer to call him by the title Mahātmā, 'the great soul,' because by reducing himself to zero he was able to identify himself with the four hundred million suffering people of India and bring about not only their political emancipation but a spiritual renewal as well. Sometimes he is known as Gandhiji, the *ji* being

added to his name as a sign of affection and respect. Such was Gandhiji's spiritual stature that he could transform little people made of clay into heroes and heroines. During India's struggle for independence, we had a leader from the North-West Frontier Province whose people were very brave and enduring, but also rather violent. Gandhi had the daring to go into their midst and tell them that if they really were brave they would throw away their guns and learn to fight nonviolently. Their leader, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, responded to Gandhi's challenge and transformed himself into such an invincible combination of courage and gentleness that he became known as the Frontier Gandhi.

43

Even one person standing against violence, whether it is in the home, in the community, or between nations, can become a source of inspiration for everyone who comes in contact with him. The words from the Sermon on the Mount are not just to be illuminated in

manuscripts; the Dhammapada is not just to be inscribed on *stūpas*; the Bhagavad Gita is not just to be etched on palmyra strips and carried in our hip pocket as a talisman. The man or woman who practices the teachings of these great scriptures will become aware of the unity of life, and this awareness will give constant strength and inspiration to those who seek to turn anger into compassion, fear into courage, and selfishness into self-forgetfulness in the joy of the whole.

यदि मामप्रतीकारमशस्त्रं शस्त्रपाणयः ।

धार्तराष्ट्रा रणे हन्युस्तन्मे क्षेमतरं भवेत् ॥४६॥

46. If the sons of Dhritarāshtra, weapons in hand, attack me in battle, and if they kill me unarmed and unresisting, that would be better for me.

MY spiritual teacher, my Grandmother, did not know how to read or write, but she knew Sri Krishna, and she gave me the

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

When we fight others, we are harming everyone; when we fight all that is base and self-willed in us, we are benefiting everyone. This is the constant theme of the great scriptures. We need not be impressed by anyone who recites the scriptures or observes all the outer rituals of religion, but we cannot help being impressed by someone who can forgive, who can forget harm done to him or turn his back on his own personal profit and prestige for the welfare

of all. From the Old Testament we have these words: "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit, than he that taketh a city." It is the same theme as in the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures. "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty." Conversely, he that is quick to anger is the weakest, most pathetic, and most harmful of men.

Unfortunately, in our day anger is considered to be part of expressing oneself, a vital means of communication. We have anger groups, called by other names, and we have anger seminars, called by other names, in which people agitate one another and send each other out as harmful influences into their homes and society. We have anger books, anger plays, and even films glorifying the angry man. After attending a violent movie like this, someone may come to us with virulent words and fling these words at us like lances. But if we can sit secure and patient and, after he has exhausted himself, comfort him by our patience, win him

over by our love, we are practicing the words of the Bible: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God."

The capacity to be patient, to bear with others through thick and thin, is within the reach of anyone who will practice meditation and put the welfare of those around him before his own. We do not realize what tremendous energy for selfless living we have lying dormant within us. Because we see the world through eyes of separateness, we think of ourselves as frail, fragmented creatures, with hardly any strength to stand up in life and make our contribution. But when we take to the spiritual path and start putting into practice the wise, compassionate counsel Sri Krishna gives us in the Gita, we shall discover our real stature and be able to contribute in good measure to life.

सञ्जय उवाच ।

एवमुक्त्वार्जुनः सङ्ख्ये रथोपस्थ उपाविशत् ।

विसृज्य सशरं चापं शोकसंविग्रमानसः ॥४७॥

SANJAYA:

47. Overwhelmed by sorrow, Arjuna spoke these words. And casting away his bow and his arrows, he sat down in his chariot in the middle of the battlefield.

ARJUNA, like you and me, wants to contribute to his family's happiness and his country's welfare, but he falls despondent at Sri Krishna's feet because he does not know how to make this contribution. Sri Krishna has not yet opened his divine lips to reveal himself to Arjuna as the supreme Teacher, but he will soon do so in the second chapter, giving Arjuna the practical instruction and guidance he needs to shake off this depression and inertia.

My ancestral family used to render a community service by staging a performance of Kathakali, the traditional dance drama of Kerala, in the open courtyard of our home under the warm evening sky of spring. Everyone was welcome, and hundreds of

people would come from the village and surrounding neighborhood to see these stories from India's spiritual tradition enacted, to refresh their memory of the scriptures and deepen their devotion to the Lord who is always present in our consciousness. During the opening scenes the children would fall asleep on their mothers' or grandmothers' laps, but as soon as Sri Krishna is about to come on stage the mothers awaken them and they sit up with eyes wide open. Everyone gets ready: people who were nodding become alert, and those who were talking become silent. We concentrate the moment we hear Sri Krishna is coming, because he is our real Self. So for me, the real Gita begins with the second chapter where the Lord begins to teach. When we see Sri Krishna, it is a reminder that beneath all our surface deficiencies and seeming drawbacks, there is always present in our hearts the source of all joy and security who is the Lord.

To discover the Lord within is the supreme purpose of life, worthy of all our time, energy, resources, and dedication. For most of us, pain and suffering are necessary to make us grow up. Like little children learning to walk without support, we have to learn to walk without clutching at pleasure or profit. Watch a child learning to walk; it can be a pathetic sight to watch the little one get up only to fall down again and again. It is tempting to say out of sympathy, "Alfred, don't bother to get up. Just lie there and we'll bring everything to you." But this would permanently stunt poor Alfred's capacity for living.

It is reassuring to remember that many before us have learned to stand up to life's challenges; the mystics of both East and West tell us in inspiring words how all boredom and drabness go out of life in this greatest of all adventures. We must learn to be vigilant constantly; we cannot lapse into lack of watchfulness for one minute. Swami Ramdas describes the joy of

rising to this challenge: "There is no greater victory in the life of a human being than victory over the mind. He who has controlled the gusts of passion that arise within him and the violent actions that proceed therefrom is the real hero. All the disturbances in the physical plane are due to chaos and confusion existing in the mind. Therefore to conquer the mind through the awareness of the great Truth that pervades all existence is the key to real success and the consequent harmony and peace in the individual and in the world.... The true soldier is he who fights not the external but the internal foes."

All the capacity for fighting, all the aggressive capacity we waste in conflict with others, can be harnessed through the practice of meditation to fight against our own self-will and separateness. This is a twenty-four-hour fight, because even in our dreams we can learn to dispel fear and anger. But it will take many,

many years of valiant and unceasing resistance to win the peace that passeth all understanding.

When we meditate every morning we are putting on armor for the day's battle against our own impatience, inadequacy, resentment, and hostility. Of course, it is going to be extremely painful and distressing when we have to put all around us first and ourselves last, but at night when we go to bed there is such a fierce joy in the knowledge that we have contributed in some measure to the joy and growth of our family and community, even though we have suffered deeply ourselves. Often, however, when we have to choose to suffer ourselves rather than bring suffering to others, we do exactly what Arjuna does at the end of this chapter: we moan that we will not, cannot fight.

Without the grace and guidance of the Lord none of us can win this battle. In inspiring words, Sri Krishna will rouse us to action by reminding us that our real Self is pure, perfect, and untainted, no matter what our

past errors. It does not matter what mistakes we may have committed or what trouble we may have brought on ourselves and others out of our ignorance; if we surrender ourselves completely to the Lord of Love who is always present in the depths of our consciousness, we will discover that these mistakes never touched us. We can throw away the ugly ego mask at last if we will turn our face to the Lord, take to meditation, and do everything possible to bring peace and security to our world.

इति अर्जुनविषादयोगो नाम प्रथमोऽध्यायः ॥ १॥

Chapter Two: Self-Realization

48

सञ्जय उवाच ।

तं तथा कृपयाविष्टमश्रुपूर्णाकुलेक्षणम् ।

विषीदन्तमिदं वाक्यमुवाच मधुसूदनः ॥१॥

SANJAYA:

1. These are the words that Sri Krishna spoke to Arjuna, whose eyes were burning with tears of self-pity and confusion.

RIGHT from the beginning of the second chapter Sri Krishna reveals himself as the perfect spiritual teacher, striking a strong note intended to shock Arjuna out of his despondency. When Sri Krishna, silent until now, opens the dialogue, there are no soft words, no honeyed

phrases. He pours withering contempt upon Arjuna, who has been weeping and protesting that he cannot fight against his senses, passions, and self-will. No spiritual teacher fails to resort to this method of shocking and strengthening us with strong words when occasion demands—and of course, when opportunity calls for it, supporting us with tender, compassionate, and loving words also.

Once I went to my spiritual teacher, my Grandmother, complained to her that I was in great sorrow, and asked her why people should cause me suffering. You should not picture my Granny as a sweet old lady seated in a rocking chair, knitting. There were times when she would take me to task and use language that would hurt and yet strengthen me. She could be very harsh, particularly to those who were close to her. This was the mark of her love. And on this occasion, she pricked my bubble with ease by pointing out that I was not suffering from sorrow, but from self-pity. When I grieve

for others, that is sorrow, which is ennobling and strengthening. But when I grieve for myself, it is not really sorrow; it is the debilitating emotion called self-pity.

Immediately, like a true friend, Lord Krishna tells Arjuna to stop behaving like a water buffalo, which if it sees a pool of mud will go and roll in it over and over again until it is completely covered with mud. In order to live like a human being, to lead the spiritual life, Sri Krishna insists, Arjuna must stop wallowing in self-pity. To apply this to ourselves, we have only to look into our minds to see how much of our time we spend in dwelling upon what our father did to us, what our mother did to us, or what our husband said five years ago on a certain rainy morning. This is what goes on in the witches' caldron seething in our consciousness.

Arjuna has beautiful eyes, but he has been sulking like a little child, and shedding so many tears of self-pity that he cannot see anything clearly. Our eyes, when full of self-pity, see

even those who are dear to us as very cruel, as persecutors—not because they are like that, but because the tears of self-pity have clouded our vision. As the Buddha puts it: “‘He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me,’ in those who harbor such thoughts hatred will not cease. ‘He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me,’ in those who do not harbor such thoughts hatred will cease.” In the next verse Lord Krishna will tell Arjuna to silence this “she did this to me, he did this to me” refrain in his consciousness so that he can hear the Lord. Sri Krishna has to shock. He has to be severe to get Arjuna out of this morass. This is the way he shows his love.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

कुतस्त्वा कश्मलमिदं विषमे समुपस्थितम् ।

अनार्यजुष्टमस्वर्ग्यमकीर्तिकरमर्जुन ॥२॥

SRI KRISHNA:

2. *This despair and self-pity in a time of crisis is mean and unworthy of you, Arjuna. How have you fallen into a state so far from the path to liberation?*

SRI Krishna looks with severity at Arjuna, who is overwhelmed by the horror and agony of self-naughting, and says, "Where does this depression, despair, and self-pity come from, Arjuna? Get rid of these things. They have no place where I live in your heart of hearts."

The Lord uses the word *anārya*, which means 'unworthy,' to refer to Arjuna, whose conduct has not been fully worthy of himself as a human being. You and I, by coming into the human context, have evolved beyond the animal stage. What distinguishes us from the animal level is our capacity to forget our own petty, personal satisfactions in bringing about the happiness of all those around us.

On one occasion when I was in college, a group of college friends and I were discussing the usual topics that young men talk about when my spiritual teacher overheard a few key words, mostly about personal pleasure, profit, and prestige. She was just coming from the cow shed, which she cleaned with her own holy hands every morning. The cows provided us with milk, butter, and yogurt, and therefore she considered it a necessary part of hospitality to make the home of the cows clean, to give them proper food, and to guard them against sickness. So, just as she was coming out of the cattle shed, she heard us all talking in this vein. She never wasted time on many words. She caught hold of one of my cousins, who was the ringleader, and told him, "You get in the cow shed. That is where you belong. We will give you plenty of hay, cotton seeds, and rice water." Because of her great love for us, she could shock us with these strong words without hurting us at all.

It is not enough if we walk on two legs, part our hair, and go about in a new suit. That does not make us a human being. The capacity to forget our own personal pleasures, and to bless those who curse us—these are what mark a human being.

Arjuna cowers now because there is lightning darting out of the eyes of the Lord when he says *asvargya*: “You have locked the door of the kingdom of heaven within by refusing to eliminate your ego, by failing to turn your back upon self-will and separateness.” The Lord shocks Arjuna out of his torpor by using these strong words, and when he has been pulled out of his despondency and despair, Sri Krishna continues in the third verse:

51

क्लैब्यं मा स्म गमः पार्थ नैतत्त्वय्युपपद्यते ।
क्षुद्रं हृदयदौर्बल्यं त्यक्त्वोत्तिष्ठ परन्तप ॥३॥

3. *It does not become you to yield to this weakness. Arise with a brave heart, and destroy the enemy.*

SRI Krishna asks Arjuna to come out of this whirlpool in which he has been caught, saying, "It is unworthy of you. You are a blessed human being now and you cannot say that these challenges are too great to face."

When the senses are driving us, we cannot make the excuse that we are unable to resist. We cannot say that just because there is food nearby we must eat. We cannot say that everybody smokes, therefore we must smoke; everybody drinks, therefore we must drink. However difficult circumstances may be, however formidable the challenges may be, we can be certain that because the Lord is within us we have the infinite resources of his love and wisdom to meet the challenge. When our dear ones are agitating us, we cannot complain that we cannot live with them, because the Lord will answer: "Why can't you? I am in you. Draw upon Me to return love for hatred, goodwill for ill will."

Having thus made short work of Arjuna's ego, Sri Krishna now tells him to get up, to rise to his full stature, to straighten his head until it reaches the stars with the whole sky as a crown. He says, "Arjuna, you have such valor in you because I live in you; all you need do is to draw upon Me and you can destroy the enemy completely." He ends the verse by addressing Arjuna as *parantapa*, 'destroyer of the foe,' which is the ego.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

कथं भीष्ममहं सङ्ख्ये द्रोणं च मधुसूदन ।

इषुभिः प्रतियोत्स्यामि पूजार्हावरिसूदन ॥४॥

गुरुनहत्वा हि महानुभावान् श्रेयो भोक्तुं भैक्ष्यमपीह लोके ।

हत्वार्थकामांस्तु गुरुनिहैव भुञ्जीय भोगान् रुधिरप्रदिग्धान् ॥५॥

ARJUNA:

4. *How can I ever bring myself to fight against Bhīshma and Drona, who are worthy of reverence? How can I, Krishna?*

5. Certainly it would be better to spend my life begging than to kill these great and worthy souls; if I killed them, every pleasure I found would be tainted.

EVEN though Sri Krishna has been taking Arjuna to task for bemoaning his helplessness and his inability to conquer his own sense cravings and selfish urges, Arjuna still feels that the senses are his friends. He turns to Sri Krishna and says, "What kind of counsel are you giving me? These senses are good, steady friends of mine. I should receive them with hospitality and give them everything they ask for. I am shocked that you should use such unspiritual language and ask me to defy the clamor of my senses."

In our own daily life we can see how much conflict we have where the senses are concerned. When the eyes want to see something agitating, we feel we must show them all kinds of violent sights. When the ears

want to hear raucous music that will agitate the mind and damage our hearing, we tell the Lord, “You don’t expect us to say no, do you?” Since we do not want to be cruel to our ears, we take them to all kinds of parties where the din is so great it lifts the roof. Then food—what the palate demands *must* be good for the body. Highly spiced, deepfried, overrefined—this is the stuff the palate enjoys; so we conclude that it is very good for the body.

In the early part of our spiritual development this conflict is likely to come to all of us because we have given license to our senses most of the time. Similarly, we have never consciously tried to go against our self-will, and therefore even the discipline of putting our family and friends first is going to take a long time to master. We are likely to complain to the Lord that by asking us to put other people first all the time, he is making our path too difficult. “Why should I inflict violence on my self-will?” we moan. “This agitates my mind, making meditation difficult.”

न चैतद्विद्मः कतरन्नो गरीयो यद्वा जयेम यदि वा नो जयेयुः ।
यानेव हत्वा न जिजीविषामस्तेऽवस्थिताः प्रमुखे धार्तराष्ट्राः ॥ ६ ॥

6. I don't even know which would be better, for us to conquer them or for them to conquer us. The sons of Dhritarāshtra have confronted us; but why would we care to live if we kill them?

ARJUNA now raises a question which many of us may be tempted to ask when we are having difficulties on the spiritual path. He says, "After all, even if I conquer the senses, how do I know that I will be able to control my mind? And even if I control my mind, how do I know that I will be able to eliminate the ego? This is all speculation. I am not convinced that all this is so carefully connected. It appears too logical. What does it matter if I conquer my senses or my senses conquer me? What is the use of rising to the summit of human consciousness and conquering the world if I am not there to enjoy it—if my senses are detached, my mind

cannot get excited, and there are no more likes and dislikes?"

It seems to Arjuna that he is being asked to throw himself into an even more painful, agitating state. He is completely bewildered, and now breaks down and asks for spiritual guidance from Sri Krishna, the Lord of Love, who has been listening quietly and compassionately all the while.

कार्पण्यदोषोपहतस्वभावः पृच्छामि त्वां धर्मसम्मूढचेताः ।
यच्छ्रेयः स्यान्निश्चितं ब्रूहि तन्मे शिष्यस्तेऽहं शाधि मां त्वां प्रपन्नम् ॥७॥

54

7. My will is paralyzed, and I am utterly confused. Tell me which is the better path for me. Let me be your disciple. I have fallen at your feet; give me instruction.

ARJUNA tells Sri Krishna, "I am your disciple. Now be my teacher and instruct me." In the orthodox Hindu tradition, until we ask the teacher to be our guru, showing our

readiness to receive his guidance on the path of meditation, he does not offer to do this for us. It is a great moment in the Gita when for the first time Arjuna declares himself the devoted disciple of Sri Krishna and asks him to be his beloved teacher. The word guru means 'one who is heavy,' so heavy that he can never be shaken. A guru is a person who is so deeply established within himself that no force on earth can affect the complete love he feels for everyone. If you curse him, he will bless you; if you harm him, he will serve you; and if you exploit him, he will become your benefactor. It is good for us to remember that the guru, the spiritual teacher, is in every one of us. All that another person can do is to make us aware of the teacher within ourselves. The outer teacher makes us aware of the teacher within, and to the extent we can be loyal to the outer teacher, we are being loyal to ourselves, to our Ātman. We are told in the scriptures to select a teacher very carefully. We should not get carried away

by personal appearance—because we like his hair style or his saffron robe. We have to listen carefully, judge carefully, and then make our own decision. Once we make a decision and select an outer teacher who is suited to our spiritual needs, we must be completely loyal to him.

If I may refer to my own small example, I have committed the innumerable mistakes that most of us commit in our modern civilization, but in giving all my love to my Grandmother, I was able to attain some spiritual awareness. When the disciples love the guru, it is this love that unifies their consciousness. At the time when we are ready for it, the spiritual teacher will step aside to show us that all the love we have been giving him has been directed to our own Ātman. The guru, who has become complete in himself, does not need anyone's love to make him secure; it is in order to unify the consciousness of the disciple that the relationship exists.

If you are prepared to undertake the long journey, the teacher will give you the map and all necessary instructions, but you have got to do the traveling yourself. That the teacher cannot provide. The purpose of visiting a spiritual teacher is to be reminded that there is a destination, there is a supreme goal in life, and we all have the innate capacity to undertake the journey. When people used to sit in the presence of Sri Ramana Maharshi and praise him, he would just smile as if to say, "There is no Sri Ramana Maharshi. I am just a little keyhole through which, when you fix your eye with complete concentration, you can see the beckoning, irresistible vision of the Lord."

The Lord is most eager to meet us. He is much more eager than we are. He has been waiting and waiting for millennia, and we are standing him up. Every minute he is looking to see whether there is anybody coming home at last, and finally, after millions of years of evolution, when all our toys are broken, we decide

reluctantly to turn back. When we go back like this after millions of years of separation, the Lord tells us out of his infinite love, "What good boys and girls to have come on your own." In this verse Arjuna begins to turn to the Lord, by asking him to lead him forward on the path to Self-realization.

न हि प्रपश्यामि ममापनुद्याद् यच्छोकमुच्छोषणमिन्द्रियाणाम् ।
 अवाप्य भूमावसपत्नमृद्धं राज्यं सुराणामपि चाधिपत्यम् ॥८॥
 सञ्जय उवाच ।

एवमुक्त्वा हृषीकेशं गुडाकेशः परन्तप ।
 न योत्स्य इति गोविन्दमुक्त्वा तूष्णीं बभूव ह ॥९॥

8. What can overcome a sorrow that saps all my vitality? Even power over men and gods or the wealth of an empire seems empty.

SANJAYA:

9. This is how Arjuna, the great warrior, spoke to Sri Krishna. With the words, "O Govinda, I will not fight," he became silent.

ARJUNA, taking his bow and arrows and putting them away, looks silently at the ground. His actions tell the Lord, "I am not going to fight because I do not have the strength, the will, or the wisdom to turn all my endeavor toward the conquest of myself." It is impossible for any of us to take on the ego, which is really a formidable foe, without undergoing tremendous spiritual disciplines. When, in the early stage of their meditation, people complain to me about difficulties in controlling the palate, or giving up smoking or drinking, the Job's consolation that I give them is that these are just preliminaries. The fight has not begun yet; you are just clearing the arena. The real fight begins only when the ego, huge and ferocious, comes onto the field.

Yesterday I was listening to a reading from the Bible about the combat between David and Goliath, which I took as a firsthand description of the spiritual life. Goliath comes and tells the armies of Israel to send their best man; if their

man wins, then Goliath and his followers will serve the Israelites, but if Goliath wins, then the Israelites will become the servants of their enemy. The description of Goliath is impressive and terrifying. His armor is invulnerable. He stands on the field like a giant. When David comes up with his five little stones and his puny sling, Goliath gets furious and says, "What are you trying to do, catch a dog?" David takes a little pebble and hits Goliath with a fatal blow right on the center of his forehead. I interpret such stories spiritually. One of the Shiva mantrams is called *pancākshara*, the 'five-lettered' mantram, and for me the five pebbles that David was carrying were a five-lettered mantram with which he was able to defeat his own ego.

57

The ego's size can be gauged by our anger, and the further we get into the depths of our consciousness, the more we shall see what anger surges in us when our self-will is violated. To defeat this colossal ego will take a long, long

period of struggle with many reverses. But finally, the Gita and the scriptures of all religions assure us, through the grace of the Lord we will be able to eliminate our ego and extinguish our self-will, which is the only barrier between us and the Lord.

तमुवाच हृषीकेशः प्रहसन्निव भारत ।
सेनयोरुभयोर्मध्ये विषीदन्तमिदं वचः ॥ १० ॥

10. As they stood between the two armies Sri Krishna spoke with a smile to Arjuna, who had fallen into despair.

THE Lord, Sri Krishna, does not get angry or agitated while listening to Arjuna's many objections, but smiling with great affection for his disciple and friend, he now begins to teach.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।
अशोच्यानन्वशोचस्त्वं प्रज्ञावादांश्च भाषसे ।
गतासूनगतासूंश्च नानुशोचन्ति पण्डिताः ॥ २-११ ॥

SRI KRISHNA:

11. You speak sincerely, but your sorrow has no cause; the wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead.

IT is a marvelous line where the Lord implies: "You speak very wise words, but your action is just the opposite of wise. You say you want joy, but the direction in which you are going is towards sorrow. You say you want fulfillment, but what you are going after every day is frustration." Sri Krishna is now implying all this to Arjuna by pointing out that the way he uses words is one thing, but the way he lives is another.

Do we want joy, security, and fulfillment? This is the question you and I have to ask ourselves first, and then we must move towards these goals. We all say we want peace. There is no individual that says he does not want peace, no nation that says it does not want peace. But if we want peace, we must do the things that

make for peace. If we do the things that make for war, only war will come. Bismarck, the Iron Chancellor of Germany, used to say, "I do not want war; I only want victory." On the individual level, too, we are tempted to say, "I don't want to fight with my parents, but I want to have my way. I don't want to have any conflict with my partner, but I want to have my way." In answer to statements like these, Sri Ramakrishna would say, in a childlike outburst, "If you want to go east, you mustn't go west." It is not enough if we talk about peace; we must work for it. Even today, after more than two thousand years of recorded history scarred by frequent wars, all the countries on the face of the earth say they long for peace but keep producing armaments, keep suspecting other countries. The Lord of Love therefore asks you and me through Arjuna, "If you want peace, why don't you work for peace?"

In the second line the Lord, in strong words, gives us the secret of our nature. Arjuna has

been talking about death, saying that he does not want to be killed, that he does not want to kill, but Sri Krishna reminds him that it is only the body which is born and which dies. You and I were never born, nor will we ever die, because our real Self is not limited by our physical body. We are spirit eternal, infinite, and immutable. This is the great discovery we make in the climax of meditation, that we are not the body, senses, mind, or intellect, but supreme spirit.

When Sri Ramana Maharshi's body was about to be resolved back into the five elements at the time of his death in 1950, all India wept for him, saying, "You are leaving us, you are going away." His simple reply was, "Where can I go? I am everywhere. How can I leave you?" This is the supreme experience of unity that comes to us in samādhi. No adventure in the external world, however great, can ever be compared to the experience of Sri Ramana Maharshi seated on his little bamboo cot, going beyond

time, place, and circumstance and seeing the cosmos as one, all creation as one in the Lord.

न त्वेवाहं जातु नासं न त्वं नेमे जनाधिपाः ।
न चैव न भविष्यामः सर्वे वयमतः परम् ॥१२॥

12. There has never been a time when you and I and the kings gathered here have not existed, nor will there be a time when we will cease to exist.

WE are now getting into one of the central themes of the Gita. Looking at Arjuna compassionately, the Lord tells him, “You have always been; you will always be.” This is the realization we have to make in life—that we are immortal, that we have everlasting life. Jesus in the Christian scriptures often says, “I have come to bring you everlasting life.” It is into this experiential discovery that we shall move in the course of our meditation. As our meditation

deepens, we shall find we are delivered from time into the Eternal Now.

One of the ways to test our progress on the spiritual path is to see how much we are able to free ourselves from the oppressive pressure of time. The clock is the most eloquent symbol of the tyranny of time. I sometimes speculate that before long we may be wearing watches with only one hand, showing a second divided into sixty subseconds. When we make an appointment we will say, "Come at two seconds and thirty-nine subseconds after two thirty." This is the direction in which we are moving as we become more and more conscious of time. I notice that if at a traffic signal the automobile in front delays ten seconds, immediately the other drivers begin using the horn. I always ask, "What is the harm if that person repeats the mantram for ten seconds and gives us all a chance to slow down?"

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The constant craze for going faster, faster, faster throws us more and more into

consciousness of time; and curiously enough, when we are oppressed by time, we make many mistakes. It is possible to do our work and attend to our duties without in any way being oppressed by time, and when we work free from the bondage of time we do not make mistakes, we do not get tense, and the quality of our living improves.

One of the easiest ways to free yourself from the tyranny of time is to get up early in the morning. When we used to go for our walks in Oakland in the morning, I would invariably see a few people—usually the same people—making a dash to catch the bus as if they were participating in the Olympics. Often they would be too late, and I always wanted to ask, “Why do you want to run to miss the bus? You might as well walk slowly and miss it.” This is the irony. You run and you still miss the bus, and in addition, the expression you direct at the bus driver is far from loving. You think that he has

been doing it on purpose—just waiting until he saw you coming, then stepping on the gas.

This simple step of starting the day early in the morning gives you an opportunity to get up leisurely, take a short walk, and then have your meditation. In meditation, also, do not be aware of time. The moment you become aware of time in meditation, there is an unfavorable factor introduced. When we were having our large class of four or five hundred people on campus, the first night in meditation a few people kept looking at their watches, which I did not object to. But I did begin to protest when they started listening to see if the watches were still ticking. Once you start meditating, forget about time. There is no need to check the clock; you can learn to time the length of the meditation fairly well by the length of the passage you are using.

In order to regain our birthright of eternal life we have to rise gradually above the physical level. Any habit that ties us to the

body through a sensory bond eventually has to be thrown away. Right at the outset of the spiritual life we must begin to rid ourselves of physical habits, such as smoking, drinking, and overeating, which will impede our progress. This is not at all a moral or ethical problem; it is a question of spiritual engineering. As long as we tie ourselves to the body by stimulating the senses, and especially by building relationships on the physical level, we cannot realize this legacy of everlasting life.

देहिनोऽस्मिन्यथा देहे कौमारं यौवनं जरा ।
तथा देहान्तरप्राप्तिर्धीरस्तत्र न मुह्यति ॥ १३॥

13. As the same person inhabits the body through childhood, youth, and old age, so too at the time of death he attains another body. The man of wisdom is not deluded by these changes.

JUST as the body, with which all of us identify ourselves, changes from childhood to youth

to old age, similarly, Sri Krishna says against the background of reincarnation, we acquire a new body when we pass from one life into another after the last great change called death. There is no need to subscribe to the theory of reincarnation to lead the spiritual life, but it cannot be easily dismissed with a shrug of the shoulders as a feverish product of the tropical imagination. There is a wealth of evidence based upon scientific research available to those who want to understand this subject before pronouncing a verdict on it. Somerset Maugham, who came to India in the late thirties and had the glorious opportunity of meeting Sri Ramana Maharshi, from whom he drew the saint in his novel *The Razor's Edge*, says that even for a nonbeliever it is very difficult to attack the philosophical structure on which reincarnation is based.

One of the common questions about the theory of reincarnation that people ask is, "How is it we do not remember anything of

our previous lives?" Sri Krishna is now implying that just as it is very difficult to remember even our childhood in this life, it is impossible for most of us to remember our past lives. If the Lord were to ask us what we were doing on our birthday when we were one year old, we would say that we do not remember. If he said, "Then you didn't exist," we would object to his teasing and say, "Of course we existed. We received presents and great love from our parents on that day."

Sri Krishna now hints to Arjuna, "Just take your thoughts back to your childhood and look at yourself as a child." If we go back as far as we can to our childhood and picture ourselves as we were then, what our needs, ambitions, hopes, and desires were, we just cannot believe that it is the same person. Today what makes us happy is money, and to a child money means nothing, gold means nothing. One of my cousins, when she was going to the elementary school in our village, had a beautiful gold necklace made by

our village goldsmith. One day when she was about eight she came home at noon for lunch, and her mother was alarmed to see that the necklace was not around her neck. "Have you lost your gold necklace, our family treasure?" she asked. And the little girl smiled and said, "No, mommy, I haven't lost it. I traded it for a mango." Somebody had offered her a mango, which was much more important, much more enjoyable, and she had just given the necklace away.

In these verses we are being led gradually to the question of death. I think it is Dr. Carl Jung who tells us that in the deep consciousness of most people there is a great fear of death, even among those who say they want to die. One of the most beneficial effects of meditation is that as our meditation deepens, we gradually lose our fear of death. This is the proof that we are rising above physical consciousness. If we talk about death to a great mystic like Sri Ramana Maharshi, who attained illumination at

age seventeen, he will just chuckle quietly and say, "I died when I was seventeen." When at the time of samādhi we lose our 'I,' our separate ego, that is death. This is the experience of St. Paul when he says, *Not I, not I, but Christ liveth in me*. Even intellectually we can ask ourselves the question: when our 'I' is wiped out, who is there to die? As we keep putting the happiness of others first all the time, our little 'I' is erased, and with the elimination of the little finite 'I,' the Immortal 'I,' which is the Lord of Love, is revealed in our consciousness.

मालास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः ।
आगमापायिनोऽनित्यास्तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत ॥ २-१४ ॥

63

14. *When the senses contact sense objects, Kaunteya⁷ we experience cold or heat, pleasure or pain. These are fleeting; they come and go. Bear them patiently, Arjuna.*

⁷ Here Sri Krishna addresses Arjuna by the familiar name *Kaunteya*, 'the son of Kuntī'. Kuntī is Arjuna's mother.

Sri Krishna is now telling Arjuna the nature of the stimulus and response relationship that our body, senses, and mind have with the finite world. When the material object that is the body comes in contact with other material objects, such as the dollar, then there is some kind of relationship established with which we have nothing to do at all. Sri Krishna, as I imagine him, now almost seems surprised and asks Arjuna, "Why should you get elated or depressed if one material object has its physical reaction with another material object?"

Depression has become one of the scourges of the modern world. Here the Gita can give immediate advice: when you are getting excited, when good things are happening to you, when fortune is smiling on you and you want to go on talking, telling everyone about how happy you are, that is the time not to get elated. On such occasions of elation—when your play is on Broadway, when your novel is on the best-seller list, when people are wanting your

autograph—I am usually a bit of a wet blanket and say, “Now is the time not to jump up. Don’t pick up the telephone. Don’t call people. Just keep repeating the mantram.” When the mind is getting agitated, when the waves of elation are starting to rise, do not give them a chance.

Elation expresses itself in many ways in many people. We have some friends for whom the danger signal is the tendency to talk constantly; for others it is grandiose visions of the future. Apparently modest, apparently humble people can have such grand visions of the future that it is difficult to remind them how ordinary most of us are in the present. People with a talent for writing, drama, music, or painting, however mediocre, may get caught on such occasions in the visualization of scenes of great grandeur. They see audiences looking adoringly at them, fighting for their autograph, and in their elation they actually believe that these things can come true. The Gita suggests that when we conjure up elated visions of grandeur, we should guard

ourselves against this kind of excitement. If we keep our equilibrium when good things happen, then when fortune frowns, as she surely will because that is her nature, we can sit back with fortitude and forbearance and remain secure.

When you are in a depression, do not withdraw into yourself. There are people with the best intentions who say, "We don't want to come and force our depression on others." This is another trick of the mind, which tells you, "Since you're in a depression now, why not confine yourself to your little cell?" This is likely to make you more and more depressed. When despondency comes, I would suggest a smile. Even if it does not look quite like a real smile, it does such good for everyone, because even a smile comes from a deeper level of consciousness. If you can at least repeat the mantram and smile, the great process of relaxation begins.

Not allowing ourselves to get elated is neither callousness nor passivity; it leads us into a deeper level of awareness where we find we are completely secure and joyful. Anything that tends to make us elated is inevitably going to throw us into depression, and one of my grievances against psychedelic drugs is the very deceptive state of euphoria into which they lead us. In order to guard ourselves against elation and the following state of deprivation, we cannot allow our senses to be stimulated unduly.

In the language of the Gita, not only elation and depression, not only pleasure and pain, but everything in life is a duality; and in order to attain samādhi, one of the magnificent disciplines taught by Sri Krishna is evenness of mind. He will say, *Samatvam yoga ucyate*: "Yoga is evenness of mind."

यं हि न व्यथयन्त्येते पुरुषं पुरुषर्षभ ।
समदुःखसुखं धीरं सोऽमृतत्वाय कल्पते ॥ २-१५॥

15. The person who is unaffected by these, who is the same in pleasure and pain, is truly wise and fit for immortality. Assert your strength to realize this, Arjuna.

THE Lord of Love begins to tell us how we can prepare ourselves for reclaiming our birthright of everlasting life. In the scriptures of all religions this promise of eternal life is given, but people usually understand it only as a very inspiring metaphor, not to be taken with scientific gravity. The mystics say that it is time that is an illusion; eternity is the reality.

How is it that you and I see people, very often our own dear ones, dying around us, and yet never ask ourselves the question: "Is this one day going to happen to me, too? Is there no way by which I can transcend death?" In my beautiful village in Kerala state, whenever a death took place, which is not infrequent in a poor country like India, my Grandmother would always insist that I accompany her to

the scene of sorrow, even when I was still an impressionable and sensitive child. As I sat by the side of dying people while my Grandmother held their hand, it used to torture me. Even in my dreams, I long remembered the sight of all this agony I witnessed during the days when I was growing up at my Granny's feet.

Later on, when through her blessing I began to turn inwards, I realized why she had taken me to those scenes of great bereavement. It was to make me ask if there were any way to transcend death. Her grace enabled me to know that in the midst of life I am in death, and it made me want above everything else to go beyond death, to attain immortality in this very life. As my meditation deepened, I was able to harness even the fear of death, turning it into power to help me to overcome death.

As I began to recall the words of my spiritual teacher, it began to dawn upon me for the first time that man is not mortal. When Einstein was asked how he discovered the law of relativity,

he said that it was by questioning an axiom accepted by all the world, and the scriptures say the stage will come in your meditation when you will begin to question whether death is inevitable. This is not an intellectual question at all, but an experience in which some lurking suspicion comes into your consciousness and whispers that you are not mortal. Once you hear that, there is great hope, and a great desire to turn your back upon all lesser desires so that you can use all your capacity to make the supreme discovery that you are eternal.

In every religion, the great founders will promise us everlasting life. In the Bhagavad Gita it is enunciated in very clear terms. The Gita says that as long as we identify ourselves obsessively with our body, we will keep falling into the jaws of death. In meditation we can very skillfully minimize this obsessive identification with the body. On many levels, in many ways, we can practice the spiritual disciplines which will gradually lift us above physical consciousness,

giving us a continuing sense of freedom and a continuing sense of progress on the spiritual path.

नासतो विद्यते भावो नाभावो विद्यते सतः ।
उभयोरपि दृष्टोऽन्तस्त्वनयोस्तत्त्वदर्शिभिः ॥ २-१६॥

16. The impermanent has no reality; reality lies in the eternal. Those who have seen the boundary between these two have attained the end of all knowledge.

THE main difficulty with Arjuna, as with all of us, is that he looks upon himself as the body, as the biochemical mechanism with which all of us identify ourselves. Sri Krishna is trying to help Arjuna break through this wrong identification to remind him that he is not the perishable body, which is only the house in which he dwells. He is the imperishable Ātman.

In this verse Lord Krishna distinguishes between what is real and what is unreal. With

the far-reaching spiritual penetration of the Sanskrit scriptures, the Gita says that whatever perishes is not real. Whatever exists in reality, exists always. That which comes into being today and passes away a hundred years from now cannot truly be said to exist. In this sense the body, which is conditioned by time, is unreal.

67

Mahatma Gandhi, who studied Sanskrit while in jail, pointed out that the Sanskrit word *sat* has two meanings: the first is 'truth,' and the second is 'that which is.' When asked for a definition of God, Gandhi said, "Truth is God. God alone is and nothing else exists." During the campaign to free India of British domination, he told the oppressed millions of India that evil has no existence in itself; we support evil, therefore it exists, but if we withdraw our support, it ceases to exist. In the example of his own life, Gandhi applied this truth on the practical level in his campaigns of nonviolent resistance against British exploitation.

Those who see the supreme Truth, the Lord, in their own consciousness, says Sri Krishna, know that that which is not real has no existence, and that which is real has no nonexistence. Arjuna just gets confused. He looks at his body, he looks at Sri Krishna's body, he looks at Sri Krishna's peacock feather, and he just cannot believe that all this is an optical illusion. This is why the Lord limits the vision of the unreality of the passing phenomenal world only to the great mystics, who have realized that beneath the apparent, impermanent world, the world of separate fragments, there lies the changeless Reality called God. But this vision does not apply to the vast majority of human beings. As long as we believe we are a separate fragment, as long as we identify ourselves with our body, we have to deal with the phenomenal world which is very real to us. I am real. Every one of us is real. Even after we realize the truth that all life is one, we can continue the activities of the workaday world, establishing personal

relationships with loving artistry. We learn to show our love to each individual in the way that is most correct for that special relationship, though never forgetting the underlying unity of all.

अविनाशि तु तद्विद्धि येन सर्वमिदं ततम् ।
विनाशमव्ययस्यास्य न कश्चित्कर्तुमर्हति ॥ २-१७ ॥

68

17. Realize That which pervades the universe and is indestructible; no power can affect this unchanging, imperishable Reality.

SRI Krishna is driving into Arjuna's consciousness the great truth that he is neither the perishable body, nor the changing senses, nor the unsteady mind, nor the wavering intellect, but the Ātman, as immutable and infinite as Brahman itself. The Lord of Love tells Arjuna the nature of that which pervades the cosmos. All that we see in life is pervaded by

the immortal, immutable, infinite Reality we call God.

अन्तवन्त इमे देहा नित्यस्योक्ताः शरीरिणः ।
अनाशिनोऽप्रमेयस्य तस्माद्युध्यस्व भारत ॥ २-१८॥

18. The body is mortal, but he who dwells in the body is said to be immortal and immeasurable. Therefore, O Bhārata, fight in this battle.

THIS body of ours will come to an end, but we, the Ātman, are eternal. Here again there is the reminder that we have no end, and therefore never should confuse ourselves with the perishable body. The body is changing from moment to moment, and even in the few minutes you have been reading these words, the body has already moved closer to the great change called death. The mind is subject to even more rapid changes. We have only to look at our desires and moods to see how much the mind is subject to change. In Sanskrit

the word for the phenomenal world is *samsāra*, 'that which is moving intensely'—being born, dying, being born again, dying again.

Whenever we cling to anything that is continually changing, we will become more and more insecure with the passage of time. When we identify ourselves obsessively with the body, every morning begins to pose a threat as we get older and move into the latter half of life. Every morning we look in the mirror to see if there are new wrinkles on the face, bags under the eyes, or grey showing in our hair. Even if, with the advance of modern surgery, these bags and wrinkles can be removed, after ten or twenty years the same fate will come to us. Such is the paradox of life: when we cling to the body, it loses its beauty, but when we do not cling to it, and use the body as an instrument given to us to serve others, even on the physical level it glows with health and beauty, as we can see from the lives of many great mystics. When Sri Ramakrishna walked along the streets of

Calcutta, legends say people were dazzled by his beauty. His spiritual radiance was so great that it would shine through the body. Ramakrishna did not like drawing the attention of people, so with his childlike simplicity he got an old blanket and covered his body when going out. When our consciousness becomes pure, even the body begins to reflect its light.

The body is the temple of the Lord and must be looked after with care. Even at the age of seventy-seven, my Grandmother had a beautiful, healthy body because she was always aware that this temple had to be kept in good order, swept with the mantram broom, and purified through the daily practice of meditation and discriminating restraint of the senses. We show respect for the Lord within by keeping the body healthy, clean, and beautiful. Any attempt to misuse the body, or to indulge the senses at the expense of the body, is a violation of the divine presence. Where books, movies, television, and our eating habits are

concerned, we must be vigilant to see we are not indulging the senses at the cost of the health of our body or mind. Even with those who are making progress on the spiritual path, the senses can play havoc if vigilance is relaxed. In order to transform our belief that we are the changing body to identification with the Ātman, we begin by governing the senses very carefully for many years. This is not done in an ascetic spirit, or for the purpose of mortification, but to see that every day we give the body what is needed to sustain it as a spiritual instrument.

Just as we purify the physical body, called *sthūlasharīra* in Sanskrit, with vigilant care of the senses, healthy physical exercise, and repetition of the mantram, we purify the subtle body, *sūkshmarīra*, by cultivating healthy thoughts. Thoughts are the food of the subtle body of samskāras, our mental and emotional conditioning.⁸ We are eating this food all the

70

8 A samskāra is a latency or a tendency in our personality, conditioned by experiences in this and former lives. It is almost always a negative term, implying rigidity and lack of freedom. A very strong samskāra might be called an obsession. *Samskāra* comes

time, and every time a thought rises in the mind we have added either to the nutrition of the subtle body or to its malnutrition. The unhealthy effect on the mind of anger, resentment, and hostility is so great that it can cause far-reaching damage even on the physical level. To keep the subtle body pure and healthy we must first and foremost cultivate the virtue of forgiveness.

य एनं वेत्ति हन्तारं यश्चैनं मन्यते हतम् ।
 उभौ तौ न विजानीतो नायं हन्ति न हन्यते ॥१९॥
 न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचिन् नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः ।
 अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥२०॥

19. One person believes he is the slayer, another believes he is the slain. Both these are ignorant; there is neither slayer nor slain.

20. We were never born, we will never die; we have never undergone change, we can never

from the root *kri* 'to do' or 'make,' plus the prefix *sam*, 'fully,' completely'; therefore the word implies that something is fully formed, elaborated, or rigid.

undergo change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, we do not die when the body dies.

SRI Krishna continues to explain our real nature in this verse, which is a favorite of mystics in India. *Na jāyate*, we were never born; *na mriyate vā*, therefore we will never die; *nā 'yam bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyah*, we have never undergone any change, and we will never undergo any change. *Aja*, never born; *nitya*, eternal; *shāshvata*, immutable. And finally, in a flash of subtle humor, the Lord adds *purāna*, 'the ancient one': compared to us the Himālayas are like a newborn baby. When the world was not, when the galaxies were not, we were already greybeards faltering with a staff.

The play of the Lord, in which he assumes a body and seems to pass through childhood, youth, and old age, is beautifully portrayed in Kerala in the Guruvayur Temple, dedicated to Lord Krishna. Sri Krishna is worshipped there in three different forms during the three

periods of the day. In the morning if you go to the temple you will see a little baby Krishna in a cradle being fed, bathed, and sung to sleep. Most children like to go for the morning service. They see that the Lord is even younger than they, and they have such compassion for him, and feel so protective, that they do not want any harm to come to the little one. This protective feeling towards the Lord as a little boy is very good discipline for spiritual awareness. At noon Sri Krishna is a young man straight as a palm tree, outgoing and very vigorous. You see Lord Krishna as the embodiment of physical fitness at its best. You find the peacock feather, the garland of wildflowers, the yellow silk dhoti, and the bamboo flute. Young people like to visit the temple at noon, when it is easy for them to identify with the Lord. In the evening, when the sun is about to set and tropical India is at its artistic best, the old people like to go and see the Lord, who, hardly able to stand up with a staff, is ready to shed the body. The

different images serve to remind you that these are all changes which affect only the body, and that you should learn to rise above the physical level so that you do not get caught in the cycle of change.

वेदाविनाशिनं नित्यं य एनमजमव्ययम् ।

कथं स पुरुषः पार्थ कं घातयति हन्ति कम् ॥२१॥

वासांसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि ।

तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णान्यन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही ॥२२॥

72

21. Realizing That which is indestructible, eternal, unborn, and unchanging, how can we slay or cause another to slay?

22. As we abandon worn-out clothes and acquire new ones, so when the body is worn out a new one is acquired by the Self, who lives within.

IN this homely verse, Sri Krishna says that just as when our clothes become old and tattered we throw them away to put on new ones, similarly, when this body has become unfit for serving

others, it is time to throw it away. We should not cling to it. When Sri Ramana Maharshi's body was about to fall away and thousands of his disciples begged him to continue on, he said, "No, this body is no longer able to serve you. As long as it can serve you, I will retain it, but when the time comes when it can no longer serve you, I am going to lay it aside."

One of the facts about my Granny's life that I do not usually refer to is her attitude towards death. For her, death was not a painful topic because she believed so firmly that our real Self cannot die. In other words, even though we cannot but grieve when our dear ones pass away, the mystics tell us that underneath this grief we should always remember that death is only a change of rooms. They are speaking mostly against the background of transmigration, or reincarnation. We should all be aware, though, that the spiritual life does not depend on our acceptance of reincarnation, nor does meditation require that

we subscribe to the theory of transmigration of souls. Whether we believe in one life or in a million lives, the supreme goal is valid; the basis of meditation remains valid for all. I would strongly discourage trying to speculate about previous or future lives; this life is headache enough. Let us confine our attention to this life and try as far as our capacity goes to learn to love the Lord here and now.

73

नैनं छिन्दन्ति शस्त्राणि नैनं दहति पावकः ।
 न चैनं क्लेदयन्त्यापो न शोषयति मारुतः ॥२३॥
 अच्छेद्योऽयमदाह्योऽयमक्लेद्योऽशोष्य एव च ।
 नित्यः सर्वगतः स्थाणुरचलोऽयं सनातनः ॥२४॥
 अव्यक्तोऽयमचिन्त्योऽयमविकार्योऽयमुच्यते ।
 तस्मादेवं विदित्वैनं नानुशोचितुमर्हसि ॥२५॥

23. *The Self cannot be pierced by weapons or burned by fire; water cannot wet it, nor can the wind dry it.*

24. *The Self cannot be pierced or burned, made wet or dry; it is everlasting and infinite, standing on the motionless foundations of eternity.*
25. *The Self is unmanifested, beyond all thought and beyond all change; knowing this, you should not grieve.*

ARJUNA still does not grasp what Sri Krishna means by “our real Self, our Ātman.” In this particular verse, the Lord is trying to awaken Arjuna, and all of us, to the truth of our existence. In referring to our real personality, which is divine, he uses three words beginning with *a*, which means ‘not’: *avyakto 'yam*, *acintyo 'yam*, *avikāryo 'yam*. *Avyakta* means ‘that which is not expressed,’ ‘that which remains concealed.’ Our real personality is not revealed at all; it is very cunningly concealed. It is *acintya*, or unthinkable, because it is beyond the dualities of conceptual thinking. It is *avikārya*, beyond all change. Our real personality never grows because it is ever perfect. It is never enriched

because it is always full. If we try to understand the applicability of these three terms to our own personality, we may begin to suspect that it lies beyond the fleeting body, beyond the turbulent senses, beyond the restless mind, beyond the clouded intellect.

Avyakta comes from the word *vyakta*, which means 'completely expressed,' 'manifested.' We all look upon ourselves as only our apparent personality, the body-mind complex, never realizing our real personality, which is the infinite, immortal, immutable Ātman. If someone were to ask us what we consider our personality, we would be likely to say that our height is six foot three, our weight two hundred twenty pounds. To this a sage like Sri Ramana Maharshi would say, "I did not ask you the dimensions of your house; I want you to tell me what your real personality is." If we tell him that we have two million in the bank, the illumined man will say, "You haven't answered my question." If we add

that we have won the Nobel prize, he would still say, "Don't beat about the bush."

Meister Eckhart summarizes the truth of the Ātman beautifully when he points out that the seed of God is latent in all of us. In Sanskrit it is called the Ātman; Meister Eckhart prefers to use the homely expression "the seed of God." He says that just as apple seeds grow into apple trees and pear seeds into pear trees, God seeds grow into God trees. The word *avyakta* implies that our only purpose in life is to reveal the divine personality that is concealed in all of us. The seed has to be helped to germinate, the weeds have to be removed regularly, and then the plant becomes a God tree.

The question then arises as to how we can reveal this hidden divinity in our everyday life. To see what noxious weeds keep the seed of our true divinity from growing, we have only to look at people who are insecure, who dwell upon themselves. Such people look at everything, everyone, through their

own personal needs; these are the people who say they are very, very sensitive. In my early days in Berkeley, one of the expressions that I heard often when I visited Telegraph Avenue was "I'm so sensitive." According to this interpretation, "insensitive" refers to anybody who treads on my corns, although when I tread on another's corns, I don't even know it. In the language of the mystic, being sensitive means being sensitive to the needs of others. You will find that the more you attend to the needs of others, in your own family for example, the less you will get hurt, agitated, or hostile over seemingly trivial things.

In a movie my wife and I saw recently, one that had been highly praised by critics, the daughter could not sleep one night just because her mother had repeated one question twice: "Have you forgotten my candy?" The daughter thought that her insomnia that night was a result of utter sensitiveness. Now, my mother often repeats herself half a dozen times—

repetition runs in our family. And I don't say she is casting aspersions on my integrity. I just say she knows I am an absentminded professor, and I am likely to forget things. As long as we are deeply convinced that our parents want only our happiness, that our partner or our children want only to add to our joy, things are not likely to upset us. My mother uses curt language at times, but under no circumstances would it occur to me to think that she is trying to vent some pentup hostility or to take it out on me, say, because the milkman diluted the milk more than he is permitted to. Wherever there is not this deep faith in those around us, I think that no attempt at courtesy, no attempt to repeat the right words and phrases, will bring about clear communication. Whenever we get agitated or apprehensive in daily relationships, because of some remark, some act of omission or commission from those around us, the very best thing we can do is use the mantram.

All of us are trying to build our personality on the short span of time in which we thrash about in the sensory world. During the Anglo-Saxon period, a few Christian emissaries came to England to preach the gospel of Christ. One of the Anglo-Saxon kings, Edwin, took counsel with his advisors over the new faith. It must have been a bitter winter evening, with snow outside and torches lighting up the hall, for the answer Edwin received is as evocative as it is thoughtful. "My lord," one man replied, "it has often seemed to me that we live like a swallow that suddenly darts through this hall at dinnertime and passes out again through a far window. It comes from the darkness and returns to darkness; for only a short while is it warm and safe from the winter weather. That is how I regard our life. I don't know where I have come from; all I know is a little span of light, until I pass again into the darkness beyond. If this new faith can tell us truly what lies before and after, I think it most worthy of being followed."

The Gita says that outside of this life we come from infinity and go again into infinity. This short spell in between, called *vyakta*, the finite, the mortal, the physical spell, has hypnotized us so that we say, "My personality lives only for one hundred years, from the time my body was born until the time it will die." But in the first word of this verse, *avyakta*, we are reminded that our life is infinite. Jesus constantly reminds the people not only of ancient Judea but of the whole modern world that we can have everlasting life by rising above the physical level of consciousness. This is a great challenge that can set the imagination of man on fire if he can understand that it is possible to rise so high above physical consciousness and fragmentation that he can see not only what goes on in the lighted hall, but also what is outside in the infinite darkness beyond death.

The second word is *acintya*. Because our real Self, our divine personality, is beyond all the dualities of conceptual thinking, it can only

be revealed when the turbulent factory of the mind has become completely still. For most of us, the mind factory keeps working twenty-four hours, day in and day out, without a holiday, and without any strikes either. There is only overtime. All of us must have experienced moments when we have begged, "If only I could stop thinking. If only I could close down, put up a little note, 'Don't enter here. It's a misdemeanor.'" If we could, we would find ourselves beginning to reveal our true identity. One of the unfortunate trends of our modern civilization is described by that learned phrase, *Cogito ergo sum*: "I think, therefore I am." The mystic says, "I have stopped thinking; therefore I am." You can see the diametrical contrast. We are all under the impression that if we go beyond thinking, we are nowhere. If the mind is closed down, we fear we will be out of a job: "What will I do? How will I spend my time? What will I dream about in my sleep?" The answer is: why do you want to dream? Why

do you want to go after personal profit and personal pleasure? It is in forgetting yourself, and in serving others, that you really come to life.

One of the constant reproaches that used to be flung at me in my early days of meditation was, "You have such a fascinating personality. Why do you want to throw it away? Look at your intellect, razor sharp; why do you want to blunt it? Look at your mind, so active, so productive; why do you want to still it?" It is not even possible for most of us to suspect that at present we have no personality. Most of us cannot reveal even one ray of the magnificence within us. This is why Sri Ramana Maharshi and other mystics will not take us seriously when we say we live. The mystics tell us that if we can only succeed in throwing away this mask which has become part of our face, the physical-psychical mask that we now call our personality, then all our magnificent capacity for loving, acting, and serving will come into our lives.

अथ चैनं नित्यजातं नित्यं वा मन्यसे मृतम् ।
 तथापि त्वं महाबाहो नैवं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥२६॥
 जातस्य हि ध्रुवो मृत्युर्ध्रुवं जन्म मृतस्य च ।
 तस्मादपरिहार्येऽर्थे न त्वं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥२७॥
 अव्यक्तादीनि भूतानि व्यक्तमध्यानि भारत ।
 अव्यक्तनिधनान्येव तत्र का परिदेवना ॥२८॥

26. *O mighty Arjuna, even if you believe the Self to be subject to birth and death, you should not grieve.*

27. *Death is inevitable for the living; birth is inevitable for the dead. Since these are unavoidable, you should not grieve.*

28. *Every creature is unmanifested at first, and then attains a manifestation, O Bhārata. When its end has come, it once again becomes unmanifested. What is there to lament in this?*

IN spite of all the Lord's assurances about the immortality of the Self, there still lurks in Arjuna's consciousness the thought: "I am the body; when the body dies, I die." This is one

of the occasions in the Gita when Sri Krishna teases Arjuna, telling him that even if he believes he is the body, even then he should not be afraid of death, because death is the natural consummation of the body's span of life. The Lord is forcing Arjuna to break through his wrong identification with the body, which is only the house in which he dwells.

Through the practice of meditation, we will acquire the delightful incapacity to associate people very much with their physical appearance. If someone asks me, "How tall is Jeff?" I have to take time to try to picture him, then use a mental tape and try to remember his height. This is a healthy sign. Particularly when someone asks me how old a person is, it takes a certain amount of time for me to recall. When we do not associate people with their physical appearance, with their age, we are beginning to associate them with the Ātman. The more we dwell upon the physical appearance and age of others, the more we are conscious of

our own appearance and age. The mystics tell us we should be concerned less about these details of packaging and concerned more with the contents. When I look at people, I like to look at their eyes. These are the windows into the contents, which is the Lord. Gradually, as we become more and more conscious of the Ātman, we will be looking straight at people through their eyes and deep into the Lord of Love who is within.

आश्चर्यवत्पश्यति कश्चिदेनमाश्चर्यवद्ब्रूदति तथैव चान्यः ।
 आश्चर्यवच्चैनमन्यः शृणोतिश्रुत्वाप्येनं वेद न चैव कश्चित् ॥२९॥

29. The glory of the Self is beheld by a few, and a few speak of its glory; a few hear about this glory, but there are many who listen without understanding.

SRI Krishna passes on to a verse for which there is a close parallel in the parables of Jesus. Sri Krishna says that people in their response

to the spiritual life seem to fall into various categories. Similarly, Jesus tells this parable: *Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow: And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the wayside, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up. And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred.* (Mark 4:3–8)

It is a beautiful presentation. *And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the wayside, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up.* Unless there is a window open in our consciousness, some entry into the deeper state of consciousness, we will be unmoved by even

the most eloquent presentation of the spiritual life. Somewhere in our consciousness there must be the suspicion that the passing toys of the world can never satisfy us. Even intelligent, educated, successful people, after listening to a talk on the spiritual life and meditation, may turn to their friends and ask, "What is he talking about?" In such people there is no window open; they are skimming, however successfully, on the surface of life. Very often they may ask, "Why do we need meditation?" Or, after I have waxed eloquent on what meditation can do in transforming all that is ugly into all that is beautiful in our consciousness, some good people have come up and said, "We don't need meditation because we *are* beautiful. You folks need this transformation; evidently you have quite a lot to transform." Still others of this tribe will say, "We are always happy. We get up happy; we go to bed happy; even in our dreams we are happy." One of our friends on the Blue Mountain used to tell me to call such

people “smiling cabbages.” When Jesus talks about the seeds falling by the wayside and the fowls devouring them, he is talking mostly about people in whom the words go in one ear and out the other.

In order to grow, you need sorrow; in order to become loving, you very often need distress, and turmoil is often required to release your deeper resources. Unless you have suffered yourself, it is not easy for you to understand those who are suffering acutely. Unless you have gone through some of the distressing vicissitudes of life, you cannot easily sympathize with others. Many people, even when they have gone through a good deal, suffer from a convenient amnesia with the passage of time. The older person has a tendency to forget some of the things he did when he was young. That is why he condemns the failings of the younger generation too readily. His own past sufferings should enable him to understand, sympathize, and help.

And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth. This is the second category. In Sanskrit there is a word—*ārambhashūra*, ‘those who are heroes at the beginning’—which applies to many of us. The first time we hear a good talk on meditation, we really catch fire. On one occasion a young fellow came up at the end of my talk and said, “This is what I’ve been looking for all my life.” I am still looking for him. Others, on the way home, get a deerskin, a Patanjali pillow, Mysore incense, and Ravi Shankar records, all in preparation for meditation. But after this upsurge of enthusiasm has exhausted itself in shopping, meditation is forgotten. It is not enough if we content ourselves with the preliminaries; we have to see that it is not a temporary infatuation, which passes away within a few days. Jesus must have met quite a number of this type in ancient Jerusalem, because he goes into greater detail:

But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.

And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. This is the third type. When we were in Berkeley twelve years ago, we tried to have a vegetable garden at the back of our house. We had tomatoes, corn, and pumpkins. My agricultural advisor was a young British friend who knew even less about gardening than I did; his main advice to me was, "Give the weeds a chance." I listened to him carefully, and between us we got one ear of corn, a few tomatoes, and pumpkins which I was told would not be edible at all. The weeds had really prospered; they choked out the corn, the tomatoes, and the pumpkins. In meditation, even though we meditate regularly in the morning, if we do not take care to pull out the weeds that are rampant in the garden of the mind, spiritual seeds are not likely to thrive. On Lee Street, where we reside, we have one of the best lawns, thanks to our friend Sumner. The

dandelions which used to form the majority on the lawn are now disappearing. The dandelions are rather attractive, and they also have a place in the scheme of existence, but on our street they are not looked upon with favor. In the early days, our neighbors must have found it a little disquieting when these dandelions came up so quickly. Sumner would come and pull up the weeds, and as soon as he walked away the dandelions would say, "Is Sumner gone? Let's come up." We didn't know about their habits, so we had just been pulling off the flowers and throwing them away. Later Sumner explained that their roots go deep, and unless something drastic is done at the root, it is not possible to prevent the dandelions from coming up.

And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred. There is sometimes a suspicion that the spiritual life is rather selfish. In the early days, when we try to make meditation the basis

of our life and retire from some of our former activities and former cronies, it is not unlikely that we will be branded as unsociable. On such occasions we can strengthen ourselves by remembering that the practice of meditation is not going to benefit us alone. We may not be able to reach thousands, as does a great mystic like Sri Ramakrishna; but each of us, as our spiritual awareness deepens, can help a few members of our family and a few friends to find their center of gravity within.

देही नित्यमवध्योऽयं देहे सर्वस्य भारत ।
तस्मात्सर्वाणि भूतानि न त्वं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥३०॥

82

30. The Self of all beings, living within the body, is eternal and cannot be harmed. Therefore, you should not grieve.

IN my village, where death was not uncommon, most people on their death bed would send for my Grandmother just to have her sit by

their side. They would hold her hand or look into her eyes, which said, "There is no death." For her, the dissolution of the body was not death at all. At the time of samādhi, this is the realization the lover of God attains. When he becomes united with the Lord in his heart, he goes beyond identification with the body. The physical nexus is cut once and for all, and afterwards, though he looks after the body very carefully, he knows that it is just an instrument to be used to convey the truth of immortality to all those ready to receive it.

The body is not me; it is only the jacket which I wear. When this jacket is torn and tattered, the time has come for me to throw it away and put on a new jacket. Sri Krishna asks, "What is there to grieve about? What is so tragic about putting on a new jacket? Do you want to keep an old jacket that lets in cold air, makes you uncomfortable, and can no longer be used to serve others?"

When you are able to go deep into meditation and rise above physical consciousness, it will seem as though you can just take off the body as you would take off a jacket and leave it on the hanger until you finish meditating. If sometime in meditation you go very deep into your consciousness, after going home you may even find that you have left your jacket at the ashram. Mystics in India have been victims of this divine phenomenon at the most inopportune times. Once, while walking on the streets of Calcutta, Sri Ramakrishna heard a song about the Divine Mother, or saw someone seated in meditation with eyes closed, and had such a sudden transformation of consciousness that he dropped his dhoti. The dhoti is wrapped very gently around the hips. It is not meant for sudden attacks of higher states of consciousness; it is meant for the secular way of life. I can imagine Ramakrishna's embarrassed disciples gathering around him and asking, "Blessed One, where is your dhoti?"

and he, in sublime simplicity, answering, "You ask me where is my dhoti? I ask you where is my body!"

Body consciousness is the obstacle to divine awareness, and every day we must ask ourselves what is likely to decrease our identification with the body. Whatever increases physical consciousness cannot be an aid to the spiritual life. Overeating, for example, intensifies body consciousness. Every time we are tempted to eat something because of an advertisement or an old samskāra, we should ask ourselves if the body needs it or if it will merely stimulate the palate. Once we start retraining our sense of taste, which is in the mind, we can enjoy green salad and fruits as the greatest of delicacies. Skipping a meal, especially when we have eaten a little more than is necessary at the previous meal, is another way of lessening body consciousness. Other aids for lessening physical consciousness are giving up harmful habits such as smoking, drinking, the use of

drugs, and overindulgence of any kind. The Gita does not ask you to do this for puritanical reasons; it says that if you want to rise above physical consciousness, these are the things you have to throw away. Once this obsessive physical identification has been broken through, you feel so good, so high, all the time that you cannot imagine using any artificial aid to be a few inches high when you are now almost the height of the cosmos.

स्वधर्ममपि चावेक्ष्य न विकम्पितुमर्हसि ।
 धर्म्याद्धि युद्धाच्छ्रेयोऽन्यत्क्षत्रियस्य न विद्यते ॥ ३१ ॥
 यदृच्छया चोपपन्नं स्वर्गद्वारमपावृतम् ।
 सुखिनः क्षत्रियाः पार्थ लभन्ते युद्धमीदृशम् ॥ ३२ ॥
 अथ चेत्त्वमिमं धर्म्यं सङ्ग्रामं न करिष्यसि ।
 ततः स्वधर्मं कीर्तिं च हित्वा पापमवाप्स्यसि ॥ ३३ ॥
 अकीर्तिं चापि भूतानि कथयिष्यन्ति तेऽव्ययाम् ।
 सम्भावितस्य चाकीर्तिर्मरणादतिरिच्यते ॥ ३४ ॥
 भयाद्गणादुपरतं मंस्यन्ते त्वां महारथाः ।
 येषां च त्वं बहुमतो भूत्वा यास्यसि लाघवम् ॥ ३५ ॥
 अवाच्यवादांश्च बहून्वदिष्यन्ति तवाहिताः ।

निन्दन्तस्तव सामर्थ्यं ततो दुःखतरं नु किम् ॥३६॥
 हतो वा प्राप्स्यसि स्वर्गं जित्वा वा भोक्ष्यसे महीम् ।
 तस्मादुत्तिष्ठ कौन्तेय युद्धाय कृतनिश्चयः ॥३७॥

31. *Considering your dharma, you should not vacillate. For a warrior there is nothing higher than a war against evil.*
32. *O Arjuna, the warrior who is confronted with such a war should be pleased, for it has come of itself as an open gate to heaven.*
33. *But if you do not participate in this battle against evil, you will be violating your dharma and your honor, and you will incur sin.*
34. *The story of your dishonor will be repeated by people endlessly; and for a man of honor, dishonor is worse than death.*
35. *These brave charioteers will think you have withdrawn from battle out of fear; those who formerly esteemed you will treat you with disrespect.*

36. Your enemies will ridicule your strength and say things that should not be said. What could be more painful than this?

37. Death means the attainment of heaven; conquest means the enjoyment of the earth. Therefore rise up, Kaunteya, with the resolution to fight.

Now Sri Krishna begins giving specific instruction to Arjuna, a very practical man who is a little impatient with all the philosophical touches the Lord has been adding. He looks ready for the supreme teaching, and Lord Krishna, who knows when the time is right, plunges into the great verse:

सुखदुःखे समे कृत्वा लाभालाभौ जयाजयौ ।
ततो युद्धाय युज्यस्व नैवं पापमवाप्स्यसि ॥३८॥

38. Having made yourself alike in pain and pleasure, profit and loss, victory and defeat,

engage in this great war and you will be freed from sin.

TATO *yuddhāya yujyasva*. *Yuddhāya* means 'for battle,' for the great war. We are all born to fight the ego, to do battle against the three phalanxes of the ego's formidable army: fear, which is the infantry; anger, which is the cavalry; and lust, most powerful of all, which is the elephantry. The language of the Gita is really appropriate when it describes this as a long, drawn-out war. If we talk in terms of one life, then all our life this war will rage; if we talk in terms of a million lives, against the background of evolution, this war has been going on all the time. The war is between what is selfish in me and what is selfless in me: what is impure in me pitted against what is pure in me, and what is imperfect against what is perfect.

Sukhaduhkhe same kritvā. Here is the way to embark upon this war against all that is death in yourself so that you may have immortal life.

Sukha is pleasure; *duhkha* is pain. Make yourself alike in pleasure and pain. Here is one of the central themes of the Bhagavad Gita. Even if you fight with all your might, the ego will always win, you will always die again, the cycle of birth and death will go on and on, unless you succeed in being alike in pain and pleasure. When I used to hear this from my Grandmother, I would always make the same practical objection: "I don't know how to do this. I like pleasure, and I don't like pain." In answer, her smile seemed to say, "How original of you!" This is everybody's problem; it is the human condition to be pleased by pleasure, and to be displeased by pain. This is why Sri Krishna says, *Sukhaduhkhe same kritvā*: transform your mental state into perfect equanimity if you do not want to die. When you get the firm resolve not to die, when there is no price you are not prepared to pay in order to transcend death, then you have the unfailing motivation for carrying out this great discipline of being alike in pleasure and pain.

When pleasant things happen to us, the mind immediately gets agitated, and we say, “I am pleased; I am happy.” We wrongly identify ourselves with this passing wave of mental agitation called pleasure, and because we identify with the wave of pleasure, we cannot help identifying with the passing wave of pain also. When something is a little more pleasant, the mind gets a little more agitated and becomes excited. If we repeatedly get caught up in the same experiences of pleasure and excitement, they become *samskāras*; the mind becomes more turbulent, and we get caught more and more in the cycle of birth and death.

Suppose someone praises us, “Look at your hair: gleaming like molten gold. Look at your eyes: Mediterranean blue. Look at your lips: ruby from the mines of Golconda.” When somebody praises our appearance, almost all of us respond in the same way; immediately our mind becomes agitated. The point Sri Krishna makes is not that we have to

tell people, "Don't praise me; I am trying to make my mind calm." What Sri Krishna says is to be grateful if someone declares that you are irresistible, but do not depend for your security on that; do not allow your mind to be affected. The way to remain calm when good things are happening to you, when people are praising you, is to repeat the mantram. As soon as someone looks appreciatively at your appearance, start repeating Rāma, Rāma, Rāma. I know it is dampening, but as long as you are vulnerable to praise, you will be vulnerable to condemnation also.

Most of us do not realize how much we depend upon other people's approval for our security. The time may come on the spiritual path, as it came many times in the life of Gandhi, when people withdraw their appreciation and their support because we are not going the way they want us to go. When we are established within ourselves, criticism, even condemnation, will not shake our security, will

not make us hostile. We can function beautifully alone, against the whole world if necessary. If criticism is destructive, we can ignore it; when it is constructive, we can benefit from it.

More than once the people of India refused to follow Gandhi, particularly in the early days. "You are an ascetic," they said. "You are a dreamer; you are impractical. We cannot follow you." Gandhi would always answer, in effect, "I am not asking you to follow me. If you want me, my terms are complete nonviolence. If you are not prepared for that, look for another leader." Many times he said this, and many times the people of India said, "All right, we are going to look for another leader." But after some days they would return to him. This is what faith in oneself means: if necessary, I will go alone. What do I want when I know the Lord is within me? Whose criticism am I afraid to face?

The Lord continues to emphasize the duality of life in the word *labhālabhau*, 'profit and loss.' Today you may get fifty percent on your

investment; tomorrow you may lose fifty percent. Be alike in gain and loss, not only in terms of money, but in terms of time, energy, and effort. Personal profit agitates the mind and gets you selfishly involved. "How much is it going to bring me? If it brings me fifty percent it is a philanthropic enterprise. If it brings me loss it is not good business." Even though you may have a high code of personal conduct, the mental agitation continues when you are attached to profit. In whatever you are doing, says Sri Krishna, keep your equanimity. He uses one more word, *jayājayau*, 'victory and defeat.' Make your mind alike in victory and defeat, in gain and in loss, in pain and in pleasure; then you will go beyond death to the supreme state.

एषा तेऽभिहिता साङ्ख्ये बुद्धिर्योगे त्विमां शृणु ।
बुद्ध्या युक्तो यया पार्थ कर्मबन्धं प्रहास्यसि ॥ ३१ ॥

39. *You have heard the intellectual explanation of sāṅkhya, O Pārtha.⁹ Now listen to the principles of yoga; by practicing these you can break through the bonds of karma.*

ARJUNA is an intelligent man who has been taught by the best teachers in ancient India, and Sri Krishna therefore tries to satisfy his intellectual needs to some extent. This kind of intellectual background to the spiritual life is called *sāṅkhya*, which literally means 'counting' or 'listing.' First the spiritual teacher lists carefully the benefits of meditation and spiritual disciplines; but listening to these theories is not enough. The disciple must begin their practice. The theory is called *sāṅkhya*; the actual practice is *yoga*. The word *yoga* often has been misunderstood, especially in the West, as the practice of certain physical exercises. These exercises are not *yoga*; they are *āsanas*. Neither is music or dancing *yoga*. There may

9 Another matronymic for Arjuna, meaning 'son of Prithā.'

be musicians in India who say their music is yoga, but it is not. There may be dancers who claim their dancing is yoga, but I am afraid it is not. Yoga is the practice of meditation and the allied spiritual disciplines. When the senses are stilled, when the mind is stilled, when the intellect is stilled, when the ego is stilled, then the state of perfect yoga is reached.

Arjuna, having accepted Sri Krishna as his teacher and listened carefully to his initial instruction, is now ready to hear in detail about the actual practice of spiritual disciplines.

In this verse the Lord promises Arjuna that if he practices these disciplines—bases his life on meditation, repeats the Holy Name, restrains his senses intelligently, and puts the welfare of all those around him first—then he shall go beyond the law of karma. The law of karma is not a concept limited to only the Hindu and Buddhist traditions; no one has stated this law in clearer terms than Jesus the Christ: *As ye sow, so shall ye reap*. If we contribute to the

suffering of those around us, we cannot escape the law which will bring this suffering back to us. Similarly, if we begin to keep the welfare of others in view, and contribute to it every day, we are contributing to our own joy as well.

In the ultimate analysis, our resentments and hostilities are not against others. They are against our own alienation from our native state, which is cosmic consciousness, Krishna-consciousness, or Christ-consciousness. All the time we are being nudged by some latent force within us. Somebody is trying to remind us what our native state is, and all the time we are under this pressure from within. Our senses are turned outwards, and we are adepts at personal profit and pleasure, so we do not like to hear these little reminders; but the needling goes on. When we get tense, it is easiest to vent our frustration by making cracks at our children, our wife, or our husband—it is just a matter of geographic proximity. When we attack other people, when we become a source of trouble

to others, it is not because we want to add to their trouble; we have just become an object of trouble to ourselves. Our nerves are tense; we cannot sleep properly; we cannot sit down and meditate. Our partner is close by, our parents are close by, our neighbor is next door, so why not go and get them agitated? We succeed in agitating seven people, and each of them is now prepared to agitate seven more. Agitation, particularly the form that follows the precept "Express your anger; explode your anger on society," is infectious, and this chain of retribution will eventually bring our agitation back to us. When we are agitated, when we are ready to burst our anger upon others, the immediate solution is to go for a long walk repeating the mantram.

नेहाभिक्रमनाशोऽस्ति प्रत्यवायो न विद्यते ।
स्वल्पमप्यस्य धर्मस्य त्रायते महतो भयात् ॥४०॥

40. On this path effort never goes to waste, and there is no failure. Even a little effort toward spiritual awareness will yield protection from the greatest fear.

FOR me this is one of the most memorable verses in the Gita, and it will take a lifetime on the spiritual path to appreciate its applicability to every aspect of human life. When we meditate on the Lord within for even a short time every day, this effort is not wasted. Even if we meditate only thirty minutes every morning, and try to practice the allied spiritual disciplines to a small extent during the day, this can go a long way in guarding us against many fears, known and unknown, which lurk in our consciousness. Most of us have fears of losing what we believe gives us security. Those who go after money are doing so under the impression that this is the way to become secure. They are the victim, the toy, of the stock exchange. There are others who are afraid of losing their youth.

Beauty has nothing to do with age. We can be beautiful in childhood, in youth, and in old age to the extent we are unselfish. To be secure, we must find the source of security within ourselves. The advice given by Sri Krishna in the Gita is simple and profound: if times are bad today, try to contribute the best you can to the welfare of those around you. If times are good today, also try to contribute the best you can to the welfare of those around you. You can serve others no matter if times are good or bad. This is the choice we make in order to find security within ourselves.

१०

व्यवसायात्मिका बुद्धिरेकेह कुरुनन्दन ।
बहुशाखा ह्यनन्ताश्च बुद्धयोऽव्यवसायिनाम् ॥४१॥

41. Those who follow this path, Arjuna, who resolve deep within themselves to seek Me alone, attain singleness of purpose. For those who lack resolution, the decisions of life are many branched and endless.

SRI Krishna says to look at the life of the man of the world, whose mind is many-pointed, like a grasshopper jumping from one blade of grass to another. Every day he keeps making decisions, most of them wrong. This is the natural pattern of worldly life when we go after personal pleasure, profit, prestige, and power. In comparison, in the spiritual life only one major decision is necessary. If, after turning to meditation, we look back upon our past, upon the innumerable wrong decisions we have made in seeking fulfillment in the world without, going down one blind alley after another, and contrast this with our present development, where everything is being subordinated to reaching the supreme goal, we see that now our consciousness is slowly being unified.

We are all granted a reasonable margin in life to make our experimentation with personal pleasure, but one day we must begin to suspect that it is not going to fulfill our deepest need, which is for Self-realization. When we

begin to have this suspicion, when it is already at work deep inside, we may still resist it for a while. We are all ego-centered, and it is only natural that when our old props are being taken away we fear that we are going to lose out. None of us need have any qualms if now and then a little voice whispers, "See what you are missing." Even after taking to meditation we are likely to have a few reservations. We may have a secret hope that in one of the rooms in our consciousness some old cravings can find an occasional welcome—we can leave the key under a stone, and they can just slip in; we do not have to invite them, but if they come we need not be inhospitable. In other words, we are all human.

In order to find the freedom of being able to function everywhere, under both hostile and favorable circumstances, to be able to reach the goal of Self-realization, we have to make the decision to find the Lord, and to subordinate everything else to union with him.

If we can make this decision to base our life on meditation, to repeat the mantram as often as we can, to restrain the senses vigilantly, and to put the welfare of those around us first, the Gita says we need have no doubts about the outcome. We need not be anxious about the results; this is the Lord's responsibility. Self-realization comes through the grace of the Lord, who is ever present within.

यामिमां पुष्पितां वाचं प्रवदन्त्यविपश्चितः ।
 वेदवादरताः पार्थ नान्यदस्तीति वादिनः ॥४२॥
 कामात्मानः स्वर्गपरा जन्मकर्मफलप्रदाम् ।
 क्रियाविशेषबहुलां भोगैश्वर्यगतिं प्रति ॥४३॥
 भोगैश्वर्यप्रसक्तानां तयापहृतचेतसाम् ।
 व्यवसायात्मिका बुद्धिः समाधौ न विधीयते ॥४४॥

42-43. *There are ignorant people who speak flowery words and take delight in the letter of the law, saying that there is nothing else, O Pārtha: whose hearts are filled with selfish desires, whose idea of heaven is their own enjoyment, and who*

engage in myriad activities for the attainment of pleasure and power. The fruit of their actions is continual rebirth.

44. Those whose minds are swept away by the pursuit of pleasure and power are incapable of following the supreme goal and will not attain samādhi.

ONE of the beauties of the Bhagavad Gita is that it does not say “You should do this” or “You should not do that.” Sri Krishna simply says that if you want joy, security, wisdom, then this is the path. If you want sorrow, insecurity, and despair, then that is the path. He gives both the maps in graphic detail, and tells you that it is for you to decide where you want to go.

In these strong verses Sri Krishna describes those who will not see samādhi. Those who say there is nothing other than this world, who say there is no God, no other life than eating, drinking, making merry, and dying—

such people will not attain samādhi. When people say they are atheists, I usually feel a little amused, because even to say that one is an atheist requires a definite experience. In order to say that there is no one in our deeper consciousness, we have to go there, knock on the door, and find that no one is at home. Of those who tell me they are atheists, I ask, "Don't you believe in yourself?" Their answer is, "Of course." "Then," I say, "you believe in God." When the Gita uses the terms "God" or "Lord," *Īshvara* or *Bhagavān*, it is not referring to someone "out there." It is referring to someone who is inside us all the time, who is nearer to us than our body, dearer to us than our life.

When our heart is full of selfish desires and sense cravings, we cannot see the underlying principle of existence which is divine. This is the significance of the word *kāmātmānah*, 'one whose soul is clouded over by selfish desires.' Ramakrishna was fond of saying that Rāma, the principle of abiding joy, and Kāma, selfish

desire, cannot live together. This is difficult for most of us to understand because we usually feel that even if Rāma has to be brought in, Kāma can be given a little closet, or some little corner with a drapery so that he isn't visible. Every mystic worth the name says it must be Rāma or Kāma; we cannot have both together. Here, too, we have to be prepared for a long period of development before Kāma finally packs up his belongings and leaves without any forwarding address. Let us not get agitated if, after a long time on the spiritual path, we still feel some of our old cravings. As our spiritual awareness deepens, we will come not to identify ourselves with those desires. Then a big desire may come and crawl like a rat across the stage of our consciousness, but we will just calmly sit and watch. It is when we identify with the desire that there is trouble. For a long period, I would suggest that when old desires and urges come, when the old samskāras come into play,

the very best way to deal with them is to go for a long, brisk walk repeating the mantram.

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Yoga as taught in the Bhagavad Gita is not about how well you do a certain posture but about how to live a purposeful life. While individually we are all at different points in our lives and at different stages of yoga practice, the Gita's universal guidance can inspire all of us as we strive to live each day with health, meaning, and balance. Audio and video downloads are available for Digital Members. Digital Members. Related Topics. bhagavad gita. Steve Harris. A long-time practitioner of yoga and meditation, Steve Harris has been studying with the Himalayan Institute since 1985.