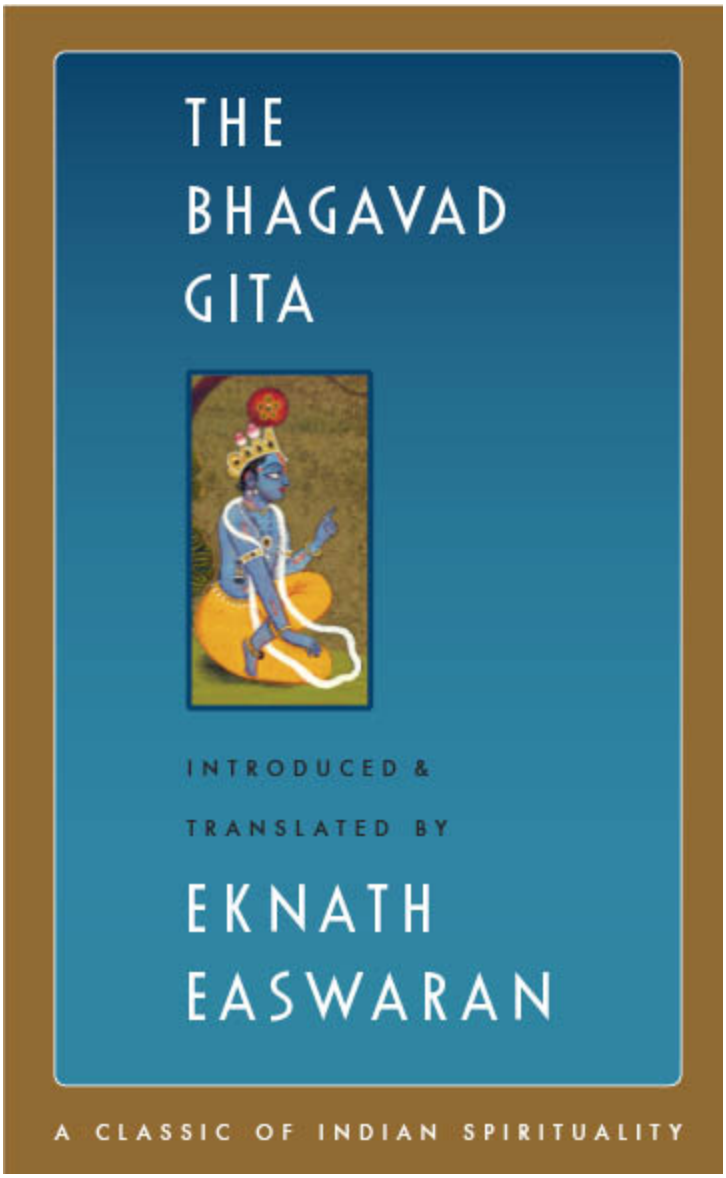

The Bhagavad Gita

Introduced & Translated by

E K N A T H E A S W A R A N

Chapter Introductions

by Diane Morrison

On this path effort never goes to waste, and there is no

failure. Even a little effort toward spiritual awareness will

protect you from the greatest fear.

[2:40]

N I L G I R I P R E S S

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Eknath Easwaran founded the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation in Berkeley, California, in 1961.

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Table of Contents

Foreword

The Classics of

Indian Spirituality

Imagine a vast hall in Anglo-Saxon England, not long after the passing of King Arthur. It is the dead of winter and a fierce snowstorm rages outside, but a great fire fills the space within the hall with warmth and light. Now and then, a sparrow darts in for refuge from the weather. It appears as if from nowhere, flits about joyfully in the light, and then disappears again, and where it comes from and where it goes next in that stormy darkness, we do not know.

Our lives are like that, suggests an old story in Bede's medieval history of England. We spend our days in the familiar world of our five senses, but what lies beyond that, if anything, we have no idea. Those sparrows are

hints of something more outside – a vast world, perhaps, waiting to be explored. But most of us are happy to stay where we are. We may even be a bit afraid to venture into the unknown. What would be the point, we ask. Why should we leave the world we know?

Yet there are always a few who are not content to spend their lives indoors. Simply knowing there is something unknown beyond their reach makes them acutely restless. They have to see what lies outside – if only, as George Mallory said of Everest, "because it's there."

This is true of adventurers of every kind, but especially of those who seek to explore not mountains or jungles but consciousness itself: whose real drive, we might say, is not so much to know the unknown as to know the knower. Such men and women can be found in every age and every culture. While the rest of us stay put, they quietly slip out to see what lies beyond.

Then, so far as we can tell, they disappear. We have no idea where they have gone; we can't even imagine. But every now and then, like friends who have run off to some exotic land, they send back reports: breathless messages describing fantastic adventures, rambling letters about a world beyond ordinary experience, urgent telegrams begging us to come and see.

"Look at this view! Isn't it breathtaking? Wish you could see this. Wish you were here."

The works in this set of translations – the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Dhammapada – are among the earliest and most universal of messages like these, sent to inform us that there is more to life than the everyday experience of our senses. The Upanishads are the oldest, so varied that we feel some unknown collectors must have tossed into a jumble all the photos, postcards, and letters from this world that they could find, without any regard for source or circumstance. Thrown together like this, they form a kind of ecstatic slide show – snapshots of towering peaks of consciousness taken at various times by different observers and dispatched with just the barest kind of explanation. But those who have traveled those heights will recognize the views: "Oh, yes, that's Everest from the northwest – must be late spring. And here we're south, in the full snows of winter."

The Dhammapada, too, is a collection – traditionally, sayings of the Buddha, one of the very greatest of these explorers of consciousness. In this case the messages have been sorted, but not by a scheme that makes sense to us today. Instead of being grouped by theme or topic, they are gathered according to some dominant characteristic like a symbol or metaphor – flowers, birds, a river, the sky – that makes them easy to commit to memory. If the Upanishads are like slides, the Dhammapada seems more

like a field guide. This is lore picked up by someone who knows every step of the way through these strange lands. He can't take us there, he explains, but he can show us the way: tell us what to look for, warn about missteps, advise us about detours, tell us what to avoid. Most important, he urges us that it is our destiny as human beings to make this journey ourselves. Everything else is secondary.

And the third of these classics, the Bhagavad Gita, gives us a map and guidebook. It gives a systematic overview of the territory, shows various approaches to the summit with their benefits and pitfalls, offers recommendations, tells us what to pack and what to leave behind. More than either of the others, it gives the sense of a personal guide. It asks and answers the questions that you or I might ask – questions not about philosophy or mysticism, but about how to live effectively in a world of challenge and change. Of these three, it is the Gita that has been my own personal guidebook, just as it was Mahatma Gandhi's.

These three texts are very personal records of a landscape that is both real and universal. Their voices, passionately human, speak directly to you and me. They describe the topography of consciousness itself, which belongs as much to us today as to these largely anonymous seers thousands of years ago. If the landscape seems dark in the light of sense perception, they tell us, it has an illumination of its own, and once our eyes adjust we can see in

what Western mystics call this “divine dark” and verify their descriptions for ourselves.

And this world, they insist, is where we belong. This wider field of consciousness is our native land. We are not cabin-dwellers, born to a life cramped and confined; we are meant to explore, to seek, to push the limits of our potential as human beings. The world of the senses is just a base camp: we are meant to be as much at home in consciousness as in the world of physical reality.

This is a message that thrills men and women in every age and culture. It is for such kindred spirits that these texts were originally composed, and it is for them in our own time that I undertook these translations, in the conviction that they deserve an audience today as much as ever. If these books speak to even a handful of such readers, they will have served their purpose.

Introduction

The Bhagavad Gita

Many years ago, when I was still a graduate student, I traveled by train from central India to Simla, then the summer seat of the British government in India. We had not been long out of Delhi when suddenly a chattering of voices disturbed my reverie. I asked the man next to me if something had

happened. “Kurukshetra!” he replied. “The next stop is Kurukshetra!”

I could understand the excitement. Kurukshetra, “the field of the Kurus,” is the setting for the climactic battle of the *Mahabharata,* the vastest epic in any world literature, on which virtually every Hindu child in India is raised. Its characters, removed in time by some three thousand years, are as familiar to us as our relatives. The temper of the story is utterly contemporary; I can imagine it unfolding in the nuclear age as easily as in the dawn of Indian history. The *Mahabharata* is literature at its greatest – in fact, it has been called a literature in itself, comparable in its breadth and depth and characterization to the whole of Greek literature or Shakespeare. But what makes it unique is that embedded in this literary masterpiece is one of the finest mystical documents the world has seen: the Bhagavad Gita.

I must have heard the Gita recited thousands of times when I was growing up, but I don’t suppose it had any special significance for me then. Not until I went to college and met Mahatma Gandhi did I begin to understand why nothing in the long, rich stretch of Indian culture has had a wider appeal, not only within India but outside as well. Today, after more than thirty years of devoted study, I would not hesitate to call it India’s most important gift to the world. The Gita has been translated into every major language and perhaps a hundred times into English alone; commentaries on it are said to be more numerous than on any other scripture. Like the

Sermon on the Mount, it has an immediacy that sweeps away time, place, and circumstance. Addressed to everyone, of whatever background or status, the Gita distills the loftiest truths of India's ancient wisdom into simple, memorable poetry that haunts the mind and informs the affairs of everyday life.

Everyone in our car got down from the train to wander for a few minutes on the now peaceful field. Thousands of years ago this was Armageddon.

The air rang with the conch-horns and shouts of battle for eighteen days. Great phalanxes shaped like eagles and fish and the crescent moon surged back and forth in search of victory, until in the end almost every warrior in the land lay slain.

"Imagine!" my companion said to me in awe. "Bhishma and Drona commanded their armies here. Arjuna rode here, with Sri Krishna himself as his charioteer. Where you're standing now – who knows? – Arjuna might have sat, his bow and arrows on the ground, while Krishna gave him the words of the Bhagavad Gita."

The thought was thrilling. I felt the way Schliemann must have when he finally reached that desolate bluff of western Turkey and knew he was standing "on the ringing plains of windy Troy," walking the same ground as Achilles, Odysseus, Hector, and Helen. Yet at the same time, I felt I knew the setting of the Gita much more intimately than I could ever know this

peaceful field. The battlefield is a perfect backdrop, but the Gita's subject is the war within, the struggle for self-mastery that every human being must wage if he or she is to emerge from life victorious.

THE GITA AND ITS SETTING

Historians surmise that like the *Iliad*, the *Mahabharata* might well be based on actual events, culminating in a war that took place somewhere around 1000 B.C. – close, that is, to the very dawn of recorded Indian history. This guess has recently been supported by excavations at the ancient city of Dvaraka, which, according to the *Mahabharata,* was destroyed and submerged in the sea after the departure of its divine ruler, Krishna. Only five hundred years or so before this, by generally accepted guess, Aryan tribes originally from the area between the Caspian Sea and the Hindu Kush mountains had migrated into the Indian subcontinent, bringing the prototype of the Sanskrit language and countless elements of belief and culture that have been part of the Hindu tradition ever since. The oldest part of the most ancient of Hindu scriptures, the Rig Veda, dates from this period – about 1500 B.C., if not earlier.

Yet the wellspring of Indian religious faith, I believe, can be traced to a much earlier epoch. When the Aryans entered the Indian subcontinent through the mountains of the Hindu Kush, they encountered a civilization on the banks of the Indus river that archeologists date back as far as 3000

B.C. Roughly contemporaneous with the pyramid-builders on the Nile, these Indus-dwellers achieved a comparable level of technology. They had metalworkers skilled in sheet-making, riveting, and casting of copper and bronze, crafts and industries with standardized methods of production, land and sea trade with cultures as far away as Mesopotamia, and well-planned cities with water supply and public sanitation systems unequaled until the Romans. Evidence suggests that they may have used a decimal system of measurement. But most remarkable, images of Shiva as Yogeshvara, the Lord of Yoga, suggest that meditation was practiced in a civilization which flourished a millennium before the Vedas were committed to an oral tradition.

If this is so, it would imply that the same systematic attitude the Indus Valley dwellers applied to their technology was applied also to study of the mind. This was *brahmavidya,* the "supreme science" – supreme because where other sciences studied the external world, brahmavidya sought knowledge of an underlying reality which would inform all other studies and activities.

Whatever its origins, in the early part of the first millennium B.C. we find clearly stated both the methods and the discoveries of brahmavidya. With this introspective tool the inspired *rishis* (literally "seers") of ancient India analyzed their awareness of human experience to see if there was

anything in it that was absolute. Their findings can be summarized in three statements which Aldous Huxley, following Leibnitz, has called the Perennial Philosophy because they appear in every age and civilization: (1) there is an infinite, changeless reality beneath the world of change; (2) this same reality lies at the core of every human personality; (3) the purpose of life is to discover this reality experientially: that is, to realize God while here on earth. These principles and the interior experiments for realizing them were taught systematically in "forest academies" or ashrams – a tradition which continues unbroken after some three thousand years.

The discoveries of brahmavidya were systematically committed to memory (and eventually to writing) in the Upanishads, visionary documents that are the earliest and purest statement of the Perennial Philosophy. How many of these precious records once existed no one knows; a dozen that date from Vedic times have survived as part of the Hindu canon of authority, the four Vedas. All have one unmistakable hallmark: the vivid stamp of personal mystical experience. These are records of direct encounter with the divine. Tradition calls them *shruti*: literally "heard," as opposed to learned; they are their own authority. By convention, only the Vedas (including their Upanishads) are considered shruti, based on direct knowledge of God.

According to this definition, all other Indian scriptures – including the Gita – are secondary, dependent on the higher authority of the Vedas.

However, this is a conventional distinction and one that might disguise the nature of the documents it classifies. In the literal sense the Gita too is shruti, owing its authority not to other scriptures but to the fact that it set down the direct mystical experience of a single author. Shankara, a towering mystic of the ninth century A.D. whose word carries the authority of Augustine, Eckhart, and Aquinas all in one, must have felt this, for in selecting the minimum sources of Hinduism he passed over almost a hundred Upanishads of Vedic authority to choose ten central Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita.

The Gita, I would argue, is not an integral part of the *Mahabharata.* It is essentially an Upanishad, and my conjecture is that it was set down by an inspired seer (traditionally Vyasa) and inserted into the epic at the appropriate place. Other elements were added in this way to the *Mahabharata,* and to other popular secondary scriptures; it is an effective way of preserving new material in an oral tradition. There is also traditional weight behind this idea, for as far back as anyone can trace, each chapter of the Gita has ended with the same formula: "In the Bhagavad-Gita Upanishad, the text on the supreme science [*brahmavidya*] of yoga, this is the chapter entitled . . ."

Finally, by way of further support, we can observe that except for its first chapter, which sets the stage, the Gita not only does not develop the action of the *Mahabharata* but is rather at odds with it. Battle lines are drawn – the climax of decades of dissension – and on the eve of combat, Prince Arjuna

loses his nerve and asks his charioteer, Krishna, what to do. Then what? Krishna – no ordinary charioteer, but an incarnation of God – enters into some seven hundred verses of sublime instruction on the nature of the soul and its relation to God, the levels of consciousness and reality, the makeup of the phenomenal world, and so on, culminating in a stupendous mystical experience in which he reveals himself to Arjuna as the transcendent Lord of life and death. He counsels Arjuna to be compassionate to friend and enemy alike, to see himself in every person, to suffer others' sorrows as his own. Then the Gita is over, the narration picks up again, and battle is joined – a terrible, desperate slaughter compromising everyone's honor, by the end of which Arjuna's side emerges victorious. But almost every man of fighting age on both sides has been slain. Only great genius would have placed the Gita in such a dramatic setting, but it stands out from the rest as a timeless, practical manual for daily living.

To those who take this dramatic setting as part of the spiritual instruction and get entangled in the question of the Gita justifying war, Gandhi had a practical answer: just base your life on the Gita sincerely and systematically and see if you find killing or even hurting others compatible with its teachings. (He makes the same point of the Sermon on the Mount.) The very heart of the Gita's message is to see the Lord in every creature and act accordingly, and the scripture is full of verses to spell out what this means: I am ever present to those who have realized me in every creature.

Seeing all life as my manifestation, they are never separated from me. They worship me in the hearts of all, and all their actions proceed from me. Wherever they may live, they abide in me. (6:30–31)

When a person responds to the joys and sorrows of others as if they were his own, he has attained the highest state of spiritual union. (6:32)

That one I love who is incapable of ill will, who is friendly and compassionate. (12:13)

They alone see truly who see the Lord the same in every creature, who see the deathless in the hearts of all that die. Seeing the same Lord everywhere, they do not harm themselves or others. Thus they attain the supreme goal. (13:27–28)

Scholars can debate the point forever, but when the Gita is practiced, I think, it becomes clear that the struggle the Gita is concerned with is the struggle for self-mastery. It was Vyasa's genius to take the whole great *Mahabharata* epic and see it as metaphor for the perennial war between the forces of light and the forces of darkness in every human heart. Arjuna and Krishna are then no longer merely characters in a literary masterpiece. Arjuna becomes Everyman, asking the Lord himself, Sri Krishna, the perennial questions about life and death – not as a philosopher, but as the quintessential man of action. Thus read, the Gita is not an external dialogue but an internal one: between the ordinary human personality, full of

questions about the meaning of life, and our deepest Self, which is divine. There is, in fact, no other way to read the Gita and grasp it as spiritual instruction. If I could offer only one key to understanding this divine dialogue, it would be to remember that it takes place in the depths of consciousness and that Krishna is not some external being, human or superhuman, but the spark of divinity that lies at the core of the human personality. This is not literary or philosophical conjecture; Krishna says as much to Arjuna over and over: "I am the Self in the heart of every creature, Arjuna, and the beginning, middle, and end of their existence" (10:20).

In such statements the Gita distills the essence of the Upanishads, not piecemeal but comprehensively, offering their lofty insights as a manual not of philosophy but of everyday human activity – a handbook of the Perennial Philosophy unique in world history.

THE UPANISHADIC BACKGROUND

The Gita, naturally enough, takes for granted that its audience is familiar with the basic ideas of Hindu religious thought, almost all of which can be found in the Upanishads. It also uses some technical vocabulary from yoga psychology. All this needs to be explained in contemporary terms if the modern reader is to grasp what is essential and timeless in the Gita's message and not get bogged down in strange terminology.

First, however, the non-Hindu faces a third obstacle: the multiplicity of

names used for aspects of God. From the earliest times, Hinduism has proclaimed one God while accommodating worship of him (or her, for to millions God is the Divine Mother) in many different names. “Truth is one,” says a famous verse of the Rig Veda; “people call it by various names.” Monastic devotees might find that Shiva embodies the austere detachment they seek; devotees who want to live “in the world,” partaking of its innocent pleasures but devoted to service of their fellow creatures, might find in Krishna the perfect incarnation of their ideals. In every case, this clothing of the Infinite in human form serves to focus a devotee’s love and to provide an inspiring ideal. But whatever form is worshipped, it is only an aspect of the same one God.

In the Gita – in fact, virtually everywhere in Hindu myth and scripture – we also encounter “the gods” in the plural. These are the *devas,* deities which seem to have come in with the Aryans and which have recognizable counterparts in other Aryan-influenced cultures: Indra, god of war and storm; Varuna, god of waters and a moral overseer; Agni, god of fire, the Hermes-like intermediary between heaven and earth; and so on. The Gita refers to the devas as being worshipped by those who want to propitiate natural and supernatural powers, in much the same way that ancestors were worshipped. In modern terms, they can best be understood as personifying the forces of nature.

This question out of the way, we can proceed to the Upanishadic background the Gita assumes.

Atman and Brahman

The Upanishads are not systematic philosophy; they are more like ecstatic slide shows of mystical experience – vivid, disjointed, stamped with the power of direct personal encounter with the divine. If they seem to embrace contradictions, that is because they do not try to smooth over the seams of these experiences. They simply set down what the rishis saw, viewing the ultimate reality from different levels of spiritual awareness, like snapshots of the same object from different angles: now seeing God as utterly transcendent, for example, now seeing God as immanent as well. These differences are not important, and the Upanishads agree on their central ideas: *Brahman,* the Godhead; *Atman,* the divine core of personality; *dharma,* the law that expresses and maintains the unity of creation; *karma,* the web of cause and effect; *samsara,* the cycle of birth and death; *moksha,* the spiritual liberation that is life's supreme goal.

Even while ancient India was making breakthroughs in the natural sciences and mathematics, the sages of the Upanishads were turning inward to analyze the data that nature presents to the mind. Penetrating below the senses, they found not a world of solid, separate objects but a ceaseless process of change – matter coming together, dissolving, and coming

together again in a different form. Below this flux of things with "name and form," however, they found something changeless: an infinite, indivisible reality in which the transient data of the world cohere. They called this reality Brahman: the Godhead, the divine ground of existence.

This analysis of the phenomenal world tallies well enough with contemporary physics. A physicist would remind us that the things we see "out there" are not ultimately separate from each other and from us; we perceive them as separate because of the limitations of our senses. If our eyes were sensitive to a much finer spectrum, we might see the world as a continuous field of matter and energy. Nothing in this picture resembles a solid object in our usual sense of the word. "The external world of physics," wrote Sir Arthur Eddington, "has thus become a world of shadows. In removing our illusions we remove the substance, for indeed we have seen that substance is one of the greatest of our illusions." Like the physicists, these ancient sages were seeking an invariant. They found it in Brahman.

In examining our knowledge of ourselves, the sages made a similar discovery. Instead of a single coherent personality, they found layer on layer of components – senses, emotions, will, intellect, ego – each in flux. At different times and in different company, the same person seems to have different personalities. Moods shift and flicker, even in those who are emotionally stable; desires and opinions change with time. Change is the