

## Introduction<sup>λ</sup>

The Bhagavadgita, or simply the Gita, is a part of India's great epic, the Mahabharata. The epic describes the struggle for the throne between two groups of cousins, the Pandavas, or sons of Pandu, and the Kauravas, or descendants of Kuru. Because of his blindness, Dhritarashtra, the elder brother of Pandu, is passed over as king, the throne going to Pandu. However, Pandu renounces kingship, and Dhritarashtra assumes power. The sons of Pandu, Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, grow up along with their cousins the Kauravas. Due to enmity and jealousy, they are forced to leave the kingdom when their father dies. During their exile they jointly marry Draupadi and befriend their cousin Krishna who from then on accompanies them. They return and for some time rule a partitioned kingdom shared with the Kauravas but have to withdraw to the forest for a period of 13 years when Yudhishtira loses all his possessions in a game of dice with Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas. When they return to demand their share of the kingdom back, Duryodhana refuses. The conflict between the two groups of cousins ends in a series of battles on the field of Kurukshetra where all the Kauravas die and only the five Pandava brothers and Krishna survive. Together, they set out for heaven, but all die on the way, except Yudhishtira, who reaches the gate of heaven. Eventually, after tests of faithfulness and constancy, he is reunited with his brothers and Draupadi in eternal bliss.

The Gita is inserted into the sixth book of the epic, just before the beginning of the great battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas on the Kuru field. The story of the battle and its preparations is told by Samjaya, who has extraordinary powers of observation and memory, to his patron the blind Dhritarashtra, father of Duryodhana. Samjaya also serves as the narrator of the Gita, which tries to deal in a principled manner with the scandalous situation where a great family is about to self-destruct in internecine warfare, making a mockery of all *dharma*, the eternal moral laws and customs that rule the universe. There is more than a hint of Buddhism in the text: the Gita can partly be read as an answer to criticism leveled at the moral of the epic from competing religious currents which rejected the active life of warriors and householders. But in a deeper sense, the war on the Kuru field reflects the same moral dilemmas as all civil wars, or for that matter, all wars in general.

While trying to justify fighting in such a war within the moral conceptual constructs of ancient Hinduism, the Gita also gives us a grand tour of the philosophical trends of the period.

In a typical Indian fashion, it combines a number of diverging intellectual currents and salvation strategies into a quasi-coherent whole, simply by assigning them to higher or lower positions in a hierarchy of values or truths. This method may partly account for some of the glaring inconsistencies of the text which have received due criticism from the Gita's detractors. But perhaps we shouldn't be shocked. We still live with such notional inconsistencies even in the modern world, for instance with the classical mechanics of Newton side by side with the relativity theory of Einstein, both theories true at the same time but not at the same level. The inconsistencies of the Gita may have been as undisturbing to the ancients as the apparent inconsistencies in our own descriptions of reality are to us.

### **The importance of the Gita.**

The Gita is perhaps the most famous of the Hindu scriptures, translated into many European and Indian languages. Over time, it has probably been the most influential of them. But its enormous popularity during the last 200 years does not quite mirror its importance in the earlier period. The great modern enthusiasm for the Gita is mainly a product of the Hindu revival movements of the nineteenth century. It was very much a preoccupation of the educated social groups who were struggling to defend Hinduism against the onslaught of Western culture. In the villages, the exciting adventure stories of the Puranas, such as the Bhagavata, always held greater appeal. Nevertheless, to thinking Hindus the Gita was of great theological importance, and from the 9th century onwards a number of commentaries were produced by such Hindu theologians as Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva and Nimbarka in the Vedanta tradition, and by Abhinavagupta in the Saiva tradition. The text was also transferred to various vernacular Indian languages, such as Jnaneshvara's Marathi version from the thirteenth century. Historically, it played an important role in the development of Indian theism.

The popularity of the Gita in the West owes as much to the relatively simple, straightforward language of the poem as to its contents. For the Sanskrit neophyte, the Gita became a convenient passage into the intricate jungle of the Sanskrit language, and since the text is accessible even to readers with little knowledge of Indian culture, it was widely translated into modern Western languages, for the first time already in 1785 by Charles Wilkins. In 1823, August Wilhelm von Schlegel produced a first class edition and added a Latin translation of the text. Thus, the fame of the poem grew rapidly, and it became an emblematic text of the Hindu religion.

The Gita is not a homogenous work but rather an ideological and theological conglomerate. Theism, asceticism, dualism, yoga, pantheism as well as pragmatic materialism are all woven into the text. This richness of composition has been evaluated differently by different Indologists. According to Richard Garbe, the Gita is a product of philosophical syncretism. Paul Deussen, on the other hand, sees in the Gita a piece of “transitional philosophy.” Other Indologists, such as Franklin Edgerton, see the Gita as a poetical-mystical poem that cannot be measured by means of ordinary logical-philosophical criteria. It seems clear that the Gita is syncretistic, but we do not have to regard it merely as a hodge-podge of ideas thrown mindlessly together. In a typical Indian fashion, the text presents a number of potential solutions to problems of practical religion, graded according to simplicity or difficulty, with the way of knowledge as the most difficult and the way of *bhakti* as the simplest and most efficient. Thus, the text does not discard anything, but time-honored strategies for success and salvation such as the sacrifice are demoted to a more humble position as methods of low efficiency. India’s penchant for synthetic, additive thinking thus finds a natural expression in the Gita.

The Gita is suprasectarian. In fact, it contains something for everybody, regardless of their philosophical approach to life. Gandhi, for instance, regarded the Gita as an “infallible guide of conduct.” But the same text was also quoted in court by Nathuram Godse, Gandhi’s murderer, who used the Gita to justify his act of violence. Thus, the Gita may be seen as ethically ambivalent, and some have criticized it for this reason. Unless one chooses to interpret it allegorically, it would seem to preach war and violence without compunction. K. N. Upadhyaya rejects the allegorical interpretations of the Gita, which would not make sense in the epic context, but he points out that the violence advocated in the text is based on the principle of just war. It is not a justification for just any kind of arbitrary violence. But it is also an explicit rejection of the trend towards renunciation of worldly life which was so prevalent at the time of Buddhism. The Gita presents an activist approach to life which enables a man to be in the world and renounce it at the same time, because he performs his personal duty disinterestedly. In this respect, what goes for the warrior goes for everybody.

## **The text: its contents and philosophical background**

### *Summary*

*Chapter 1:* Standing with his horses and chariot on the Kuru field between the two armies and accompanied by his charioteer, Krishna, Arjuna has a sudden bout of bad conscience. He realizes that he is about to engage in lethal battle with men who should normally command his greatest respect, and that he may be about to cover his head in shame and evil. He protests to Krishna, pointing out the immoral acts he is about to commit and sits down on his seat in despondency.

*Chapter 2:* Arjuna refuses to fight, but gets only scorn in return. Krishna has no patience with a warrior who will not do his duty. Only when he realizes the extent of Arjuna's despondency, does he change his attitude and start teaching the mysteries of dharmic action in this world. Krishna argues against Arjuna's moral scruples, playing upon the warrior's sense of honor as well as philosophical ideas about transmigration, the impermanence of the body and the eternity of the soul. He argues in favor of actions performed unselfishly for their own sake.

*Chapter 3:* Krishna continues his teaching, discussing the merits of sacrifice as a way to achieve good things. He introduces the concepts of *prakriti*, primordial nature, and the *gunas*, or the properties that operate on primordial nature. He emphasizes the importance of carrying out one's own duty. Arjuna should first learn to control his senses, as they confuse the mind.

*Chapter 4:* Krishna points out that both he and Arjuna have had many births in the past. Krishna is born through his wizardry, resorting to primordial nature, to save *dharma*, or universal law, in times of crisis. Krishna is not defiled by action. He explains the nature of action to Arjuna and the importance of mental discipline and knowledge.

*Chapter 5:* Theory and practice lead to the same goal. Action is just the senses acting on the sense-objects. It is assigned to *brahman*. Final peace is achieved by renouncing the fruits of action. The steady-minded man has his foothold in *brahman*. The sage controls his intellect and senses and thus achieves beatitude, forever released.

*Chapter 6:* Renunciation is mental discipline. The mentally disciplined renounces all intentions. His self remains always composed. He has the same attitude towards everyone and everything. He concentrates his self to purify it, and thus he obtains peace. The master of discipline, whose passions are at rest, becomes *brahman*. And he sees Krishna in all things. But a virtuous man fallen from mental discipline is reborn in the house of good people. Eventually he will reach the highest state.

*Chapter 7:* Krishna explains his primordial nature, both his lower and his higher. He is the origin and dissolution of the world, the best in everything. He explains the properties and their

illusory power. The man of wisdom, however, is not deluded and eventually reaches Krishna. Krishna is behind every divine form. But those who sacrifice to the gods, go to the gods, those who are devoted to him, come to him. He knows everything, but no one knows him. He is *brahman*, the material substratum and principal sacrifice.

*Chapter 8:* Krishna explains *brahman* and the individual self. At the time of death, a man will reach any state of being he is thinking of. Therefore, one should think of Krishna alone all the time. Those who reach him do not return. All manifestations arise from the unmanifest at the dawn of an eon and return to the unmanifest when the eon is over; creatures are born and dissolve, only to be born again with a new eon. But there is a higher being beyond this that does not perish, called the imperishable. This is the ultimate state, Krishna's supreme abode, the supreme spirit.

*Chapter 9:* Krishna tells Arjuna the royal secret. In his unmanifest form he has pervaded the whole world. His self is the source of all creatures, but does not exist in them. All creatures return to his primordial nature at the end of an eon. Great-souled men seek refuge in him. He is the ritual and the sacrifice, the father and supporter of the world, the origin and the dissolution. Even people of lowly origin reach the highest state when they take refuge in him.

*Chapter 10:* Krishna is the unknown source of the gods and sages. He is the first god, *brahman*, the supreme abode. He is the self, dwelling in the heart of creatures. He is identified with a number of gods as well as other persons and phenomena.

*Chapter 11:* Arjuna asks Krishna to see his supernal form, and Krishna reveals this form to him. Arjuna trembles at the sight of this dreadful appearance as all the sons of Dhritarashtra rush into the god's mouths to be crushed. Krishna tells Arjuna that all have already been killed by him; Arjuna will just be his enforcer. Arjuna asks him to assume his usual, less intimidating form.

*Chapter 12:* Those who worship Krishna in complete faith while controlling their senses come to him. They should resign all their acts to him. The devotee who neither rejoices nor hates nor mourns nor desires, but who relinquishes good and evil, is dear to Krishna.

*Chapter 13:* Krishna is the knower of the field. He summarizes for Arjuna what that field is, and explains what one has to know to achieve immortality: the supreme *brahman*, which envelops the whole world. He explains primordial nature, its evolutes and its properties. Only primordial nature acts, the self does not act. The supreme self is imperishable. Those reach the supreme who know the distinction between the field and the knower of the field.

*Chapter 14:* Krishna's womb is the great *brahman*. There he puts an embryo, and from this all creatures have their origin. The three properties bind the embodied soul in the body. Krishna explains their effects. When the embodied soul has transcended the properties, it is released from birth, death, old age and sorrow, and becomes immortal. The man who has transcended the properties is characterized by equanimity and disciplined devotion to Krishna. This makes him fit for becoming *brahman*.

*Chapter 15:* Krishna describes the Asvattha, or peepal tree, a cosmic symbol. This must be cut down with the sword of unattachment, so that one can seek the abode whence people do not return. When Krishna enters the earth, he upholds creatures through his power. He is embedded in everybody's heart, and from him spring tradition, knowledge and reason. He is the knower of the Vedas. Krishna describes the two spirits in the world, the perishable and the imperishable. Krishna transcends them both; therefore he is the supreme spirit.

*Chapter 16:* Krishna describes the different qualities that men are born to. There are two kinds of creation: the divine and the demonic. The behavior of the demonic is detailed: they are greedy, self-conceited and deluded. This leads to perdition: Arjuna should let religious science be his authority, which will teach him how to perform actions in the world.

*Chapter 17:* The faith of the human soul is characterized by the three properties. So is food. The three properties also dominate the sacrifice, as they dominate the different kinds of austerities and gifts.

*Chapter 18:* Arjuna wants to know the truth about renunciation. Krishna defines it as the rejection of agreeable actions and the relinquishment of all fruit of action. But prescribed actions should not be renounced. Krishna teaches Arjuna the five factors of the doctrine of *Samkhya*: the substrate of the action, the agent, the instruments, the different kinds of activities and fate. Knowledge, action and agent are threefold. Furthermore, intellect, resolution, and happiness are threefold. There is no being in the universe which is free from the three properties. The actions of the four classes of men are born of their nature, and men achieve perfection by devoting themselves to their separate tasks: it is better to do one's own duty without distinction than to do another man's duty well. Krishna then tells Arjuna how a man attains *brahman* and introduces him to the concept of devotion. Arjuna should seek refuge in him. Arjuna's doubts are dispelled, he is ready to fight.

*The Upanishadic background of the Gita*

The Gita addresses three deeply interwoven areas of intellectual pursuit: cosmology - or “natural philosophy” - theology and moral philosophy, with salvation as the ultimate goal. The cosmology deals with the material structure of the world, and how it functions. The theology addresses the fundamental questions concerning the gods and the *paramatman*, the supreme self or ultimate being. The moral philosophy treats the practical questions of how a man should reach salvation while living his life in accordance with the eternal ethical rules that are prescribed for men of the different social classes. In the Gita, the cosmology is largely represented by an apparent synthesis of Upanishadic elements and an early version of the *Samkhya* system, often referred to as proto-Samkhya. But there are also traces of later, classical *Samkhya*.

According to David White, we may summarize the Gita’s synthesis (if it is one) of its proto-Samkhya and Upanishadic components in terms of the three levels of its basic metaphysics: 1) the level of phenomenal existence, the universe and creatures of ordinary subject-object knowledge and experience, 2) a “higher” level of existence as the immediate source of 1) and as the object of unitive knowledge), and 3) the “highest” level of being, which is Krishna's “own highest state,” and which can only be known by means of an “undeclining devotion”. The background for the Gita’s exposition is as follows.

#### *a) Cosmology*

In early Indic religion, the manifestation of the world is sometimes depicted as an evolution from higher principles towards lower, or vice-versa. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.6 gives us an example of such an ontological hierarchy. Here, Gargi Vacaknavi, the wife of the philosopher Yajnyavalkya, asks her husband: “Since all this here is woven, like warp and woof, on water, on what, pray, is water woven, like warp and woof?” The answer is wind, and the question is repeated, as she now wants to know upon what the wind is woven. Gradually, through a regression towards higher-ranking ontological entities, she is introduced to a hierarchy starting with *brahman*, from which comes the worlds of the creator god Prajapati, followed by the worlds of Indra, of the gods, of the stars, of the moon, of the sun, of the Gandharvas, of the atmosphere, of the wind and, finally, of the waters.

In Brihadaranyaka 4.3, we find a similar regression concerning the self. Here, the self is derived from speech, which is derived from fire, which is derived from the moon, which is derived from the sun, which finally is derived from light. In the first chapter of the Chandogya Upanishad, there is yet another example where the chain starts with the ritual High Chant called the *udgitha*, continues with the *saman* (hymn), followed by the *Rig*, speech, the cosmic

spirit (the *purusha*), plants, water and, finally, earth. Thus the cosmological paradigm can be regarded as one of ontological hierarchies where the individual elements may vary, but where the principle of top-down derivation (or down-top regression) is firmly established, and where subtle elements are higher-ranking than gross elements. The cosmological pattern that we find in early and classical *Samkhya* is therefore not surprising. Here, however, primordial matter or nature is separated from the ultimate selves and the spirit. This early proto-Samkhya description of the ontological hierarchy from the Katha Upanishad 1.3.10-11, is closer to the Upanishadic view: “Beyond the sense-powers (*indriya*) are the subtle objects (*artha*), and beyond the subtle objects (*artha*) is the thought-organ (*manas*), and beyond the thought-organ is the intellect (*buddhi*), beyond the intellect is the great soul (or self) (*mahan atma*), beyond the great soul is the unmanifest (*avyakta*), and beyond the unmanifest is the spirit (*purusha*). Beyond the spirit there is nothing.”

In Upanishadic thinking, there is a difference between form and substance. A substance may assume any number of forms and yet remain itself, just as a piece of clay remains a piece of clay regardless of form, and through which all things made of clay may be known. Only formless matter is real. In the older Vedic literature, the connection between certain organs or functions of the human or animal body, are connected with macrocosmic entities: when a person dies, his sight goes to the sun, his breaths to the wind, etc. Here, sight and sun are regarded as different forms of the same principle, and therefore ontologically related. Different phenomena are assumed to share an underlying, substantial unity, for instance bones and rock, flesh and earth, hairs and grass: rocks are the bones of the world, earth its flesh, grass its hairs, etc. Such thinking is called homological and is the basis for the mechanics of the sacrifice. Through the sacrificial or ritual manipulation of a given phenomenon it is possible to affect other phenomena that are ontologically connected, much as you can manipulate a machine by pressing certain buttons that are electrically connected to other parts of the machine.

The sacrificer keeps the universe going by feeding it new energy. If you strengthen the gods through the sacrifice, they will strengthen you, says the Gita. But the trend of the Upanishads is nevertheless to reduce the importance of the sacrifice and turn towards the self. Thus the Maitri Upanishad claims that the world is a mass of thought, and that the person in the sun is identical with the person in the heart. The Mundaka Upanishad derives the world from the dismembered limbs of a sacrificial victim, but declares this to be the inner soul of all.

In the epic cosmology, there is a clear division between the primordial material principle (*prakriti*) and the spirit (*purusha*). It is this construction of reality which is referred to as proto-Samkhya. It is important to realize that the proto-Samkhya of the epic is not identical with the fully developed Samkhya of Isvarakrishna's *Samkhyakarikas*, produced perhaps some 400 years into the modern period. The term *samkhya* as used in the epic is not used in the same sense as the term for the classical system. In the epic, as Franklin Edgerton points out, *samkhya* simply means “the way of (salvation by) knowledge.” This is stated clearly not only in the Gita, but also in other texts of the same period. Thus, *samkhya* may conveniently be translated by *theory* and contrasts with the *practice of yoga*. In fact, any formula of metaphysical truth might be called “*samkhya*” provided that knowledge of this formula would lead towards salvation. What may be opposed to *samkhya* is not any theory or abstract truth, according to Edgerton, but a view that salvation is gained by some other method than knowledge.

#### *i) Proto-samkhya*

In the epic perspective, the cosmos is divided into a material and a spiritual component. Primordial matter or nature, *prakriti*, may be manifest (*vyakta*) or unmanifest (*avyakta*). Manifest *prakriti* is the phenomenal universe which we can see and experience. This primordial matter expands during its manifest phase, and contracts to a state of equilibrium in its unmanifest phase. According to the Gita, all manifestations arise from the unmanifest at the break of cosmic day; as cosmic night falls, they are dissolved in the unmanifest. Primordial nature's inner life is dominated by the three *gunas*, which are responsible for everything that happens in the phenomenal universe. In moral discourse, *guna* may simply refer to “outstanding merit” or “moral excellence.” But the term *guna* is far more complex and may also refer both to physical, mental and moral properties. It usually means a “cord,” “string,” or “thread,” but in much of Indian philosophy, it is often translated as “quality” or “attribute” and used with reference to a “substance” or thing. The *gunas* are in Sanskrit called *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, and the philosophical literature describes them in various ways. MBh 14.36-39 gives a long disquisition on the *gunas*, explaining their effects in detail. Here, they are made responsible for a number of physical, intellectual and psychological phenomena. In general, *sattva* is associated with the color white, with light, lightness, truth, purity, and goodness; it causes upward movement, happiness, bliss, lack of possessiveness and egoism. *Rajas* is associated with the color red; it causes clustering, strife, discontent, passion, turbulence, and affection. It is the cause of all free movement. *Tamas* is associated with the

color black; it is the cause of darkness, heaviness, sluggishness, inertia, delusion, ignorance, and downward movement. It restrains free movement. Thus, those who are suffused with *sattva* rise, those suffused with *rajas* stay in the middle, and those dominated by *tamas* sink down. At the social level, the lowest class is dominated by *tamas*, the warrior class by *rajas*, and the priestly class by *sattva*. However, the *gunas* do not occur in isolation, they cluster together vying for dominance. Thus, the sunshine in the sun is due to *sattva*, its heat is due to *rajas*, and eclipses are due to *tamas*.

Thus the activities of the *gunas* explain the modalities that primordial nature, *prakriti*, assumes. It is the *gunas* that are responsible for the development of the physical universe; in India's ancient cosmology they play much the same role as the laws of physics and the properties of matter in modern cosmology. I have chosen to translate the term with "property," which I believe gives a better meaning than the often used "quality" or "constituent", the latter of which would seem to refer to an entity, something a *guna* is not. These properties are psycho-physical, that is they affect both mind and matter. Since *sattva* causes illumination because of its purity, I have chosen to translate the term with *clarity* rather than purity or goodness. *Rajas*, often translated *passion*, I have translated *turbidity* in order to better bring out the physical aspect of the term. As for *tamas*, I have chosen *sluggishness*, again to emphasize the physical aspect.

In Gerald Larson's words, from an objective perspective, classical *samkhya* describes this tripartite process of primordial nature as "a continuing flow of primal material energy that is capable of spontaneous activity (*rajas*), rational ordering (*sattva*), and determinate formulation or objectivation (*tamas*)." From a subjective perspective, *samkhya* "describes the tripartite process as a continuing flow of experience that is capable of pre-reflective spontaneous desiring or longing (*rajas*), reflective discerning or discriminating (*sattva*), and continuing awareness of an opaque, enveloping world (*tamas*)." Thus, the properties are eternally active in primordial nature and account for all processes and everything that happens. All physical phenomena consist of unstable mixtures of these three properties, and the evolution and transformations of the material world is caused by the shifts in these unstable mixtures. BG VII.4 divides primordial nature into the following eight factors: earth, water, fire, wind, ether, mind, intellect and ego-consciousness, again hierarchically ordered. This is, however, a simpler system than the one we find in classical *Samkhya*.

An interesting aspect of the *samkhya* ontological hierarchy is the fact that several mental capabilities are treated as material constituents rather than as parts of consciousness, in the way it is done within a western Cartesian perspective. The Katha Upanishad lists the

components of the personality in descending order, using the chariot as a parable: the *atman* is the master of the chariot, the body is the chariot, the *buddhi* (intellect) is the driver and the *manas* (thought-organ) the reins. The sense-organs (*indriyas*) are compared to the horses and the sense-objects to the road. In *samkhya* thinking, the self (*atman*) is equated with the spirit (*purusha*). But into this equation enters the concept of the *ahamkara*, the “I-maker” or producer of ego-consciousness. This egoity faculty creates the perception of the ego, and is in the Gita’s ontological hierarchy inserted either above the *manas* and the *buddhi* (VII.5) or below the *buddhi* which then comes below the unmanifest (*avyakta*). This difference in ordering is due to the fact that Gita VII.5 is older than XIII.5, a chapter that is influenced by the classical *samkhya* system. *Manas* is often translated as “mind” but is viewed essentially as an organ. It is the special organ of cognition, just as the eyes are the special organs of sight. It imposes conceptual structure on the chaotic field of raw sensation. Furthermore, it is involved in the cognitive functions of analysis, deliberation and decision. It is closely connected with *buddhi*, or intellect, which is a more subtle and powerful faculty and responsible for higher intellectual functions such as intuition, insight and reflection. Nevertheless, *buddhi* is still regarded as a manifestation of *prakriti*. The *ahamkara* appropriates all mental experiences of the *manas* and the *buddhi* to itself, turning them into a personal, subjective experience rather than an objective, apersonal process. Together, these three faculties are referred to as the *antahkarana*, “the inner instrument,” which according to P. Schweizer comprises the individual mind-self of the western philosophical tradition. Thus, the metaphysical dividing line is not drawn between mind and matter, but rather between matter and consciousness, and the mind is placed on the material side of the ontological divide. This is an important premise when we try to understand the Indian quest for liberating knowledge and the energetic attempts to change the contents of human consciousness. For in the *samkhya-yoga* account of reality, *prakriti* is regarded as inherently unconscious and unable to produce consciousness as an effect, and the conceptual processes of the mind are produced by the mechanical and unconscious interplay of the *gunas*. Subjective awareness is according to Schweizer a distinct ontological category which cannot be derived from the stuff of which objects are made. Instead, consciousness is associated with the *atman* (self or soul), or *purusha* (spirit). Thought processes and mental events are conscious only to the extent that they receive external “illumination” from the *purusha*. It is the subtle “thought-material” of the intellect (*buddhi*) which allows mental events to appear conscious, because the *buddhi* substance is transparent to the light of consciousness. The *buddhi* functions, because of its assumed preponderance of the “transparent” *sattva* property, in other words as the interface between the material

processes of *prakriti* and consciousness. The *buddhi* receives cognitive structures from *manas*, and conscious “light” from the *purusha*, and in this manner, mental structures are able to appear conscious.

In 1982, the British philosopher Hilary Putnam published a book where he discussed a science fiction scenario he called “the brains in a vat.” In this scenario, people’s brains have been removed from their bodies and put in vats containing nutrients, where the nerves proceeding from the brains have been connected to an immensely powerful computer which feeds nerve impulses to the brains that convince them they are actually seeing, feeling and acting within the experienced reality. But is this really science fiction? Perhaps the universe simply consists of automatic machinery tending a vat full of brains and nervous systems. How could we really tell?

This fictional situation was later popularized in the *Matrix* movies, where people living in a world taken over by machines sleep in small compartments inside a huge power grid producing bio-energy for the machines. The machines feed them data to create the illusion that they are alive and acting in the world. Thus, they are deluded about their real situation.

The brains in the vat, the human sleeping in the power grid, and the *purusha* all share the same dilemma: they believe that their experiences are real, a part of themselves. For the *samkhya* thinker, liberation consists in understanding the true nature of the situation so that he can detach himself from the empty imagery and transient experiences that fill his consciousness, and instead rise above the matter in which his self has become entangled to unite with the permanent, eternal and ultimate soul of the universe without ever having to return to the unreal and painful state of material existence, the ancient Indic equivalent of the evil computer. As all actions and all doers depend upon the properties of primordial nature and thus are part of a universal web of causation, the supreme human good is a final and total liberation from the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth to which humans are shackled through their entrapment in *prakriti*.

*Samkhya* is in epic times simply the method of knowledge, and knowledge was a time-honored means of power in India. Since the earliest Vedic times, it was assumed that knowledge meant power to achieve whatever one desired. The phrase “*ya evam veda ...*” (“He who knows thus ...”) reverberates through the Upanishadic texts, introducing the fruit that will be achieved by knowing something. Knowledge brought concrete rewards, power and success. It is therefore hardly surprising that knowledge came to be seen as a road to

salvation. According to the Mahabharata, the wise cut by the sword of knowledge and the weapon of penance the connections with *rajas*, *tamas* and even *sattva* and so cross over the sea of suffering by the discipline - or method - of knowledge (*jnanayoga*). They are carried to the *paramatman*, the supreme self, whence they do not return. When the soul realizes the difference between itself and primordial nature, it becomes free from the latter, and attains to the state of enlightenment. In the Gita, *Samkhya* is not only the way of knowledge, but it is also assumed to imply renunciation of actions – quietism. Thus, the discipline of knowledge is contrasted with the discipline of action in BG III.3. Also in other epic passages besides those of the Gita do we find quietism associated with *Samkhya*. The quietist is described as a person who avoids anger, hate, lies, who returns good for evil, who is the same to all, who is desireless and avoids injuring other creatures – all characteristics described and extolled in the Gita, in spite of the fact that non-action is rejected. The Gita approaches the dilemma of action by redefining it: even among the wise there is confusion as to the nature of action and inaction. The wise see action in inaction and inaction in action. According to BG IV.22 he has risen above the pairs of opposites, such as pain and pleasure, he is free from envy and equable in success and failure, and he is not bound even if he acts. In BG IV.10, we are told that many people, purified by the austerity of knowledge are delivered from passion, fear and anger and reach the highest being. The fire of knowledge burns up the actions of the learned man. A sacrifice of knowledge is better than a sacrifice of material wealth; all action culminates in knowledge. With the boat of knowledge, one can cross over all wickedness, and there is no purifier like knowledge. Knowledge is furthermore associated with the property of clarity (*sattva*), as is greed with turbidity and negligence, delusion and ignorance with sluggishness. Knowledge is finally one of the factors that incite to action. According to BG XII.12, knowledge is better than repeated practice, but meditation is better than knowledge, and relinquishment of the fruit of action is better than meditation. Thus, the value of knowledge is eventually somewhat demoted in the Gita, giving precedence to self-less action.

## ii) Vedanta

Another philosophical perspective (*darsana*) which is embryonically present in the epic, is the Vedanta. Here, the term Vedanta simply means the end or culmination of the Veda, and refers to the Aranyakas and Upanishads. But the Vedanta school in the strict sense of the word does not exist yet, nor does the technical vocabulary later associated with it. In the classical system, the Gita is one of Vedanta's fundamental texts together with the Upanishads and the Brahmasutras, also known as the Vedantasutras. This may seem paradoxical, given that the

Gita contains so many ideas that were later associated with the *samkhya* and *yoga* systems, but the various systems were not impervious to mutual influence even in classical times. The classical Vedanta school came into existence because of the rejection of this early kind of *Samkhya* influenced Vedanta. The Gita's notion of the supreme *brahman* is typical of Vedantic thinking, whereas the classical *Samkhya* system was atheistic. Even if the later Vedantic schools disagree among themselves, they hold certain beliefs in common, such as the transmigration of the self, and they share the wish to leave the cycle of rebirths. They also regard *brahman* as the material and instrumental cause of the world, and they believe that the self (*atman*) is the agent of its own acts and therefore receives the fruits, or consequences, of actions. The first to identify the supreme *brahman* with Vishnu was the great theologian and philosopher Ramanuja (ca. 1050-1137), the central thinker of the school of qualified monism, the *visishtadvaita*.

#### b) Theology

Ancient India was a polytheistic society which tended towards monotheism. This was expressed through the idea that all divinities, just like earthly creatures, in the final analysis were derived from an ultimate principle, either an unconscious or material force, or a supreme deity. Thus, a bone of contention in Indic religious history has been *who* this supreme god is (or if there is one at all). It is usually assumed that the *paramatman*, the supreme god, of the Gita is Vishnu. But although the Hindu tradition later explicitly identified this *paramatman* with Vishnu, this may not be the case.

#### i) Brahman

In early Vedic religion, the ultimate principle of reality was *brahman*. This concept might perhaps be translated as "primordial energy" and represents something which cannot really be defined or described. *Brahman* is a neuter word, only much later does it develop into a personal god, *Brahma*. *Brahman* is a fundamental, basic force, immutable and constant. Sometimes it is seen as the ultimate source of everything, a self-born *brahman* (*brahman svayambhu*), sometimes as the first-born of Prajapati, the creator god of the Brahmanas and Upanishads. In Chandogya Upanishad 3.12.6 *brahman* is identified with the cosmic person, the *purusha*. *Brahman* is invisible, but pervades everything, it is the essence, the smallest particle in the cosmos, yet omnipresent. As a chunk of salt put in water dissolves in the water, which then tastes salty no matter where it is sampled, *brahman* is nowhere and everywhere at the same time, invisible, but yet perceptible. The Aitareya Upanishad, on the other hand, maintains that the whole world is founded on a universal consciousness which is identified as

*brahman*. Some Upanishads therefore claim that the human being consists of different layers or sheaths, where the outward coverings are more physical and material than the inner, more sublime layers. Thus the Taittiriya Upanishad mentions five such sheaths comprising the human person. Here, the physical body is a manifest coagulation – an “image” – of the more subtle mind, which is a manifestation of a preexisting wisdom. According to Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.3.1ff, there are two visible appearances of *brahman*: the one has a fixed shape, and the other has no fixed shape. The one is mortal, and the other is immortal. The immortal is the wind and the atmosphere, and identical with the person (*purusha*) in the sun, the mortal is everything else. In the BG III.15, we find *brahman* identified with primordial nature (*prakriti*), although the identification is indirect, since *brahman* is said to originate from the immutable (*akshara*). Action, however, is said to originate from *brahman*, and primordial nature is in BG XIII.20 said to be the cause of agency in the production of products, in other words the source of actions. Furthermore, the commentator Ramanuja explicitly confirms that *brahman* here equals *prakriti*. But the Gita also operates with a higher or supreme *brahman* which is immutable. And Krishna’s “higher nature,” the source and “living substance” of the phenomenal universe, should be identified with this immutable, higher *brahman* whereas his “lower nature” must be identified with the proto-Samkhya conception of the phenomenal universe. The Gita’s conception of *brahman* is thus in some respects more *Samkhya*-like than Vedantic.

## ii) *Purusha*

The word *purusha* in Sanskrit simply means “man,” but in a religious context it has acquired several other meanings as well. In the Rigveda, the *purusha* occurs in hymn X.90 as the primal cosmic principle. In this cosmogonic hymn, the moon is born from his mind, the sun from his sight, the gods Indra and Agni from his mouth, the wind from his breath, the atmosphere from his navel, the sky from his head, the earth from his feet, the quarters from his hearing. This *purusha* is the cosmic giant, from whom the world is created through the sacrifice, and therefore the source of the material world. In later Hinduism, Vishnu was identified with the sacrifice, and must therefore be identified with the *purusha* as well. At Atharvaveda XIX.42.1, the sacrifice is identified with *brahman* because it is the product of the magic power inherent in the sacrificial formulae (also referred to as *brahman*) and actions. In a way typical of Indic homological thinking, we can in this manner construe a connection between the sacrifice, Vishnu, the *purusha*, and *brahman* as alternative forms, or *alloforms*, of each other. But in addition, the term *purusha* is also used to designate the animating and

directing principle in man and in other objects of the empirical world. Thus, both the Brahmanas and the Upanishads refer to a *purusha* in the sun.

In BG XIII.12ff, we get a classic Upanishadic description of the beginningless, supreme *brahman* followed by a *Samkhya*-like description of *prakriti* and *purusha*. Here, the *purusha* is the spirit, the conscious factor connected to material beings: both primordial nature and spirit are without beginning, both the properties and their modifications originate from primordial nature, while the spirit causes the experience of pleasure and pain. The Great Lord (*maheshvara*), the supreme self (*paramatman*) is the highest spirit (*purushah parah*). Thus the highest spirit must be considered equivalent to the supreme self of Upanishadic thought. At the same time, it implies the existence of at least one “lower *purusha*.” This hierarchical order of *purushas* should not come as a surprise. Comparative mythology indicates a process where the first being is divided into several beings. In the Rigvedic hymn 10.90, *viraj* (the feminine principle) is born from the *purusha*, and the *purusha* again from *viraj*. In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the world in the beginning is described as a single body (*atman*) shaped like a man. This *atman* splits itself in two (an alternative way of being born), producing a man and a woman who through sexual intercourse go on to create the living beings of the world. When Krishna in BG 14.4 says that “great *brahman* is the womb of those forms that are produced in all wombs,” he himself being the father giving the seed, the parallel to the Upanishadic myth of the first man and the first woman is obvious. *Brahman* equals *prakriti* which equals the first woman. Other mythological material indicates a split into two men, the first king and the first priest, Yama and Manu, where the first priest sacrifices the first king, thus forming a paradigm for a higher and a lower *purusha*. The idea that there is more than one *purusha* would also find some support in the Satapatha Brahmana (6.1.1.5). Here it is stated that the *purusha* became Prajapati, the creator god, who is then substituted for the original *purusha* as the primeval victim offered by the gods as described in RV X.90.

According to David White, the second level of reality is the undifferentiated *prakriti* in which the properties are in equilibrium and “out of which the entire phenomenal existence arises. Here the dualities of the properties and their “modifications” are transcended in that “lower” *brahman-prakriti* which is also to be identified as the “lower” unmanifest. It is the “higher nature” of Krishna which is the “living substance” (*jivabhuta*) of the universe of creatures as well as their source and sustenance.” The third, “highest” level of being is according to White the third *purusha*, which is Krishna’s own “highest state.” It is the immutable one, the “higher” *brahman* which is the source of the *brahman-prakriti* of the

second level, which again is the immediate source of all phenomenal existence. Thus, in terminological terms, there is no sharp distinction between *brahman* and *prakriti*, or between *brahman* and *purusha*. Both matter and spirit appear as lower-ranking modalities of the highest spirit, the *paramatman*. In theological terms, this means that the Gita is theistic and closer to the qualified dualism of Ramanuja than to the monistic philosophy of Sankara. There is also a marked difference between the proto-*Samkhya* of the epic and the classical *Samkhya* system as taught by Isvarakrishna, which is atheistic.

In epic *Samkhya*, *purusha* – or spirit – refers to consciousness, and is the absolute, unconditioned self, described as pure and undifferentiated awareness. It is immutable and inactive, formless and without parts or limiting characteristics. *Purusha* is the metaphysical principle underlying the individual person and corresponds closely to the *atman* (self) of the Vedanta school. It exists in complete independence of the material realm, making the basic dualism of *Samkhya-Yoga* metaphysics one between consciousness and matter. Here, the self belongs to the realm of pure awareness, while the mind, as stated above, is part of matter. It is this self or spirit which is entangled in matter and yearns for liberation, and it is this which is the transmigrant that migrates between bodies in *samsara*. In the classical *Samkhya* system, the transmigrant became the “subtle body,” consisting of *buddhi*, *ahamkara* and *manas* in addition to other subtle elements. Thus, epic proto-*Samkhya* is in this respect far closer to Vedantic thinking than the later classical *Samkhya*.

### iii) Who is Krishna?

In the Gita, Krishna is not simply an epic hero, he is the highest self, the *paramatman*, and the ultimate spirit, the *purushottama*. The Indic tradition has identified this highest self with Vishnu. But the Gita does not really say so explicitly. In BG X.21, Krishna describes Vishnu as one of his many manifestations: “of the Adityas, I am Vishnu.” In the epiphany of BG XI.24 and 30, Arjuna twice addresses Krishna’s supernal form, the *rupam aisvaryam*, as Vishnu, but this does not necessarily mean that the Visvarupa of this chapter is identical with the *paramatman*. The problem with this identification is brought out by what the Gita says about the Asvattha tree in BG XV.1-4: “They speak of the imperishable Asvattha, the peepal tree, with its roots above and its branches below, whose leaves are the hymns. He who knows it, is a knower of the Vedas. Its branches spread out downwards and upwards, nourished by the properties with objects as their buds, and underneath its roots, tying in with actions, extend to the world of men. Its form is not perceived here, nor its end, beginning or foundation. Having cut down this deep-rooted Asvattha tree with the mighty sword of non-

attachment, one should then seek that abode whence people do not return when they have reached it, saying: 'I take refuge with that primordial spirit, from whom came forth this ancient activity'." The Asvattha tree would seem to be identical with the second level of reality, which according to the Gita is the source of phenomenal existence. This is the undifferentiated *prakriti* where the *gunas* are in equilibrium and out of which the entire phenomenal universe arises. According to David White, this is "the 'higher Nature' of Krishna which is the living substance (*jivabhuta*) of the universe of creatures as well as their source and sustenance."

But the Asvattha tree is also an alloform of Vishnu. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad equates man (*purusha*) with a tree: "As a mighty tree, so, indeed, is a man; his hairs are leaves and his skin is its outer bark." The tree has four branches, which are identified with the four Vedas. Interpreted as a man, a *purusha*, these branches match arms and legs. The tree has been explicitly identified with the highest *brahman*. In post-Vedic literature, it is conceived as the embodiment of the highest god and frequently said to be a form of Vishnu. This is indeed what Krishna says in BG X.30: "Amongst all trees I am the Asvattha." But then, why should it be cut down so that the man seeking salvation can reach the highest level of reality? Presumably, it *should itself be* the highest level of reality. In MBh. XIII.126.4-6, we learn that the man who every day adores the Asvattha is considered as adoring the whole universe with the celestials and *asuras* and human beings. But this is strange if Vishnu is understood as the *paramatman*. Within the theology of the Gita, it would rather seem that Vishnu is merely a partial or lower manifestation of the supreme self, identical with the *prakriti-brahman* of the second level of reality, which again might be compared to the primeval androgyne described in the Brihadaranyaka. This splits into two parts, a man and a woman, thus starting creation, and in the Gita, it is tempting to assume that *prakriti-brahman* behaves in a similar manner. At the first level of reality, the terms and concepts employed belong to proto-Samkhya and need not concern us here. Thus, we are left with a *paramatman* who is different from Vishnu, but probably closely related to the primeval *atman* of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. It is the 'ultimate spirit' (*purushottama*), the higher unmanifest, and Krishna's own 'highest state', the immutable, higher *brahman* and the source of *brahman-prakriti*. To reach this highest level, a man must cut the tie to the Asvattha tree, which then must be identical with *samsara*. Thus, in the Gita's original concept, Vishnu, the *purusha* and the sacrifice, belonged to the realm of *samsara*. So must the *Visvarupa* do. From a functional point of view, this would make sense,

for the Visvarupa devours everything, just as the lower unmanifest, the *avyakta*, absorbs *prakriti* when cosmic night sets in. Only the highest self, the *paramatman*, is beyond it.

Vishnu gradually rose from a relatively minor Vedic deity to become the supreme god of the Vishnuites, and if this interpretation is correct, in the Gita we see him very near the top. Elsewhere in the epic, Vishnu is already identified with the eternal *purusha* in much the same words as Krishna. In MBh. 1.1.22, for instance, he is said to be the primeval *purusha*, and as such the eternal and omnipresent *brahman*, *sat* (being) and *asat* (non-being), and above *sat* and *asat*. But according to Herbert Härtel, the identification of Krishna with Vishnu can only be proven for the beginning of the Gupta period, 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. This is supported by epigraphical evidence and by changes in the iconography. Thus, the “highest *brahman*” and the *paramatman* of the Gita must be Krishna-Vasudeva, possibly an amalgamation through identification of two earlier gods, Krishna and Vasudeva. The Vishnu of classical Hinduism is most likely the product of such a process where Krishna, Vasudeva, Vishnu and Narayana through various identification processes have merged into one god.

### c) Salvation

#### i) *Dharma: universal moral law and righteousness*

In Hindu culture, the term *dharma* means propriety, socially approved conduct, and by extension, law, social usage, morality, even religion. Together with economic profit (*artha*) and erotic love (*kama*) it is regarded as one of the three *purusharthas*, the goals of life. There is also a fourth goal: liberation, or *moksha*, which lies at the root of all Indic philosophical endeavours. *Dharma* originally meant “support”, and in its moral sense it supports the course of the world and protects the world order from collapse. At the individual level, *dharma* is expressed as a set of obligations that have to be performed by everyone, but different obligations apply to the members of different classes and castes. As long as one performs various acts for purposes of *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama* these acts must have their fruit or result (*phala*), whether good or bad, for the doer. Actions produce *karma*, a concept that now is well known outside the Hindu world, meaning the consequence of actions (also called *karman* in Sanskrit!) which leads to rebirth under a given set of conditions. Actions propel humans along certain trajectories in their course through *samsara*, or the chain of existence. The relative excellence of a new birth is determined by the net balance of good and bad actions in the previous births. As a law of nature, *karma* works automatically and is not regulated by any god or superhuman agent. Thus, *karma* ties men to the phenomenal world of primordial nature or matter. The fundamental problem of Hindu philosophy is to break this cycle.

*Moksha*, liberation, is the complete and permanent freedom from transmigration. The favorite term is *nirvana* which first occurs in such texts as the Gita and in Pali Buddhist texts. The literal meaning of the word is “extinction,” as of a flame, and more precisely the extinction of the flames of desire, which is often compared to a consuming fire, and which leads to action and therefore to continued rebirth. It is noteworthy that morality, or even morality accompanied by the traditional religious observances, does not lead to this goal. A morally distinguished life merely produces a better rebirth. Some sought a solution to this dilemma by refraining from action altogether, an attitude that evidently created practical problems for society. This *dharma* of non-action and renunciation, *nivritti*, was regarded as superior to the *dharma* of rituals, *pravritti*. The doctrine of renunciation was in fact so dominant in India that renouncing worldly life was regarded as a necessary prerequisite to the pursuance of a higher life.

The Gita responds to this challenge and offers another way out of the samsaric quandary. It points out that normal worldly action is motivated by desire or craving (*kama*, *trishna*) claiming that this causes the binding effect of *karma*. Liberation becomes possible when a person acts with pure unselfishness, not caring what happens to him, nor for the fruits of the action. Disinterested action does not bind to continued rebirth. Fulfilling the law with complete indifference to the results of doing one’s duty opens the door to *moksha*.

ii) *The sacrifice, the ritual, and the battle*

The *dharmasutras* and the ritual *sutras* explain how one should live a life in accordance with the law: the old customs should be practiced, and ritual work performed. Also, sacrifices (*yajnas*) must be performed in accordance with the traditional precepts (*vidhi*). In Hindu thinking, the sacrifice and the ritual are never far away, and in the epic there is no sharp distinction between the sacrifice performed by the priest and the sacrifice the warrior makes on the battlefield. According to Tamar C. Reich, the Mahabharata is replete with evocations of an agonistic, or competitive, struggle-oriented, cosmic order. The epic battle is a transposition from heaven to earth of the conflict between the gods and their adversaries, the *asuras*. The sacred order (*dharma*) is on the one hand equated with sacrifice and on the other with strife. The battle of Kurukshetra is frequently compared to a sacrifice, lending poignancy to Arjuna’s rejection of *karman*, or action. For *karman* is also ritual action, and sacrifice is the origin of the universe itself, which came about through the primeval sacrifice of the gods. Arjuna is therefore wrong on two accounts: he rejects both participating in the ritual action that sustains the world, and he rejects his own personal *dharma* as a warrior. The situation is

thrown into stark relief by archaeological finds outside Kausambi, which indicate that the Indic king Pushyamitra Sunga performed at least one, possibly several human sacrifices. Sacrifice was not simply a symbolic act restricted to the use of such substances as milk, rice and ghee. As in European antiquity, there was a gory side to it.

### *iii) Yoga*

The term *yoga* is complex. It allows for a number of different translations, all dependent upon the context. The basic meaning is "yoke" (*yoga* is in fact etymologically related to the English word "yoke"), but through various metaphorical processes the word (and the verbal root it is based on, *yuj*) came to cover a much wider semantic field. Franklin Edgerton translated it with "discipline," but this only captures an aspect of the word's complex semantics. Van Buitenen summarizes the meaning of *yoga* as (1) the process of a difficult effort; (2) a person committed to it, (3) the instrument he uses; (4) the course of action chosen; and (5) the prospect of a goal. *Yoga* sometimes has the very mundane meaning of "application, practice," sometimes it may mean "magic power," as in BG IX.5. (In fact, the exercise of *yoga* imparts magic power to the *yogin*.) In the Gita, *yoga* often seems to refer to "mental discipline": "The man whose mindset (*buddhi*) is disciplined in this world, leaves behind both good and bad actions. Therefore prepare yourself for mental discipline. Mental discipline means great strength in actions" (BG II.50). In BG VI.33 *yoga* is associated with equanimity: "This mental discipline (*yoga*) that you declared as equanimity (*samya*), Madhusudana, I cannot see that it has a stable state, given our unsteadiness." It is important to realize that the *yoga* of the Gita has little to do with Patanjali's *yoga* in the *Yogasutras* or other later forms of *yoga*, such as Hatha *Yoga* or Kundalini *Yoga*. Although BG VI.10-14 describes a person in a meditative or yogic posture, it is still very much a matter of mental exercise: "The master of discipline (*yogin*) should always discipline his self while remaining in solitude, alone, with his mind and self under control, without expectations, without possessions. Having established his seat firmly in a pure place, not too high and not too low, with a cover of cloth, deerskin and kusa grass, pinpointing his mind there with his thoughts, senses and actions under control, he should sit on the seat and practice mental discipline for the purification of his self. Firmly keeping his body, head and neck straight and immobile, gazing at the tip of his nose without looking towards the horizon, with a tranquil mind, fearless, remaining in his vow of chastity, controlling his mind and thinking of me, he should sit disciplined and intent on me." The idea that the senses should be controlled resonate in the *Arthashastra* (AS), the manual on statecraft. Improper indulgence in the pleasures caused by sense perception is dangerous. Control over

the senses should be secured by giving up lust, anger, greed, pride, arrogance and foolhardiness. This attitude is again consistent with the notion of the five faults of the *yogin*. As listed in the twelfth book of the Mahabharata, these are desire, wrath, greed, fear and sleep, or passion, delusion, love, desire and anger, all emotions to be avoided. A king behaving in a manner contrary to that, without control of his senses, quickly perishes according to AS 1.6.4. Victory over the senses is also emphasized in BG 2.61, 4.7, and 5.8; according to BG 15.21, both desire, anger and greed should be given up.

In addition to *karmayoga*, the discipline (or performance) of actions or rituals, and *jnanayoga*, the discipline of knowledge, the Gita also knows *buddhiyoga*, the discipline of the mindset (or intellect); *dhyanyoga*, the discipline of meditation; *brahmayoga*, the discipline of *brahman*; *abhyasayoga*, the discipline of repeated practice; *samnyasayoga*, the discipline of renunciation, and *bhaktiyoga*, the discipline (or practice) of devotion. Franklin Edgerton sees the common denominator of all the epic definitions of *yoga* as “disciplined activity, earnest striving - by active (not rationalistic or intellectual means).” But it seems clear that the term *yoga* also embraces intellectual activity, or mental actions. Thus, the difference between *samkhya* “theory” and *yoga* “practice” would seem to be between mental actions and physical (or ritual) actions rather than between non-action and action pure and simple. Otherwise, Edgerton’s concept of *yoga* as disciplined activity and earnest striving holds good. *Samkhya* seeks salvation by knowing something, *yoga* by doing something: the followers of *yoga* seek salvation by a disciplined course of action. But Edgerton emphasizes that the Gita’s interpretation of *yoga* was not the usual one, neither in epic times nor later. The later, classical system of the Yogasutras is according to him based upon the method of salvation described in the Mokshadharma sections of the Mahabharata. In Washburn Hopkin’s view, it would seem as if the *yoga* idea “had been engrafted upon Upanishad literature from the ‘royal knowledge,’ which is demarcated from the Brahmanic wisdom of rites, ceremonies, austerities, and simple meditation.”

*Yoga* is first expressly named in the Upanishads that belong to the Yajurveda, which is preeminently the “royal Veda.” The epic seems to draw particularly from the Upanishads that belong to this school. The *yoga* of the epic is according to Hopkins midway between the secondary Upanishads and the completed system. The ordinary saint or ascetic of the epic only practices *yoga* to achieve magical powers. One of these powers is the ability to make oneself many thousands, a power Krishna puts to good use in his *Visvarupa* epiphany. A

*yogin* can, in fact, take any form he will. Furthermore, the term *yoga* in the epic has absorbed the meaning of *tapas*, austerity, so that any austerity is called *yoga*.

However, the *yoga* preached in the Gita is more akin to the *mahipalavidhi* (method for kings) or *rajavidya* (royal know-how) which is presented by Janaka in the Mokshadharma section of the Mahabharata, 12.308ff. This implies remaining in the world and performing all acts required by the traditional duties of the station to which one is born, but with indifference to results. According to the Arthashastra, for a king, persistent study leads to wisdom (*prajna*), which leads to discipline (*yoga*), from which self-possession (*atmavatta*) arises (1.5.16). Emotional self-control is important both to the decision-maker and to the warrior. It is an essential quality for men who cannot afford to make mistakes. Thus, the concept of *yoga* in the Gita is partly influenced by the ethical training of royalty and partly by the training of a traditional *yogin* with magical powers. This pragmatic touch also surfaces in BG VI.16-17, where Krishna makes it clear that “mental discipline is neither for the man who eats too much or who doesn’t eat at all, nor for the man who sleeps too much or who goes without sleep.” Instead, “mental discipline dispels the sorrows of a man who restrains his habits of food and recreation, whose motions are measured when he acts, and who regulates sleep and waking time.” This attitude fits neatly into the instructions for how the king should regulate his day in AS 1.19ff.

But the Gita’s *yoga* also has a loftier objective: “Endowed with a pure intellect and resolutely controlling his self, relinquishing sense-objects such as sound while rejecting attraction and aversion, dwelling in solitude, eating little, with speech, body, and mind under control, always intent upon the discipline of meditation, ruled by dispassion, renouncing ego-consciousness, force, arrogance, desire, anger, and possessions, unselfish and tranquil *he is made fit to become brahman*” (BG 18.51-53). The *yoga* of the Gita may have its roots in more mundane requirements, but it has acquired a far deeper significance. Thus, *yoga* as a salvation strategy may partly have been grafted upon the prudent self-discipline of men of the world, but in a period when the hegemony of Brahminical religion was seriously threatened and many were attracted to a life of non-action and quietism, the *yoga* of the Gita forms a moral and intellectual bridge from the faithful Hindu to the men who were about to leave the fold, or who had already left it for a life of heterodox asceticism. It is therefore hardly surprising that BG VI.2 defines *yoga* as *samnyasa*, renunciation.

*iv) Bhakti*

The Gita is clearly linked to the Upanishadic tradition, and, indeed, it calls itself a collection of Upanishads. Like the Upanishads, the chapters of the Gita were meant for meditation and concern themselves with the liberation of the self - or soul - from the bondage of *samsara*, the transmigratory chain through which the self moves in the material cosmos. The Gita discusses three roads to salvation: *samkhya*, *yoga*, and *bhakti*. Of these, *bhakti* - devotion - is the safest way to God, and God loves particularly the *bhakta* - the devotee - who also acts according to his personal *dharma*, out of a sense of duty and without a thirst for the fruit of the action.

The term *bhakti*, devotion, is first mentioned in the Svetasvatara Upanishad. It is, however, made a central issue for the first time in the Gita, where it reverberates through the text, emphasizing the importance of unswerving devotion to Krishna. According to the German Indologist Ulrich Schneider, the term has its origin in warrior circles. It represents the unconditional loyalty of a man-of-arms towards his highest warlord, the king, transposed to the religious level. Thus, *bhakti* already belonged to warrior ethics before it was consistently made a part of Vishnuite religion. It continues as a vibrant force through India's religious life until modern times with the Gita as its earliest, fundamental source. In practical terms, *bhakti* does not consist in escaping from worldly duties but in dedicating all activities to God.

The salvation offered by the Gita may be conceived within the framework of the cosmological thinking of the period, but it is also influenced by emerging theism. Krishna is a "personal god," the supreme "*ishtadevata*" (or god of choice), not an anonymous divine force somewhere out in the fog, or a divine specialist ruling some isolated aspect of reality. In Indic religion, *bhakti* has the same redeeming value as faith in Protestantism. It is the pedestrian mind's road to ultimate reality and eternal bliss.

### **Notes on the critical edition**

The present translation is based on the so-called Poona edition of the Mahabharata: *The Mahabharata for the First Time Critically Edited*, 19 vols. This was a monumental project that lasted from 1919 till 1966. Ten distinguished editors participated, among whom were V. S. Sukthankar, S. K. Belvalkar, R. N. Dandekar and Franklin Edgerton. The edition was fundamentally shaped and guided by Sukthankar. This text is the basis of most contemporary western scholarship on the Mahabharata.

However, before the great epic was committed to writing, it was what is known as oral literature (or oral poetry). It was transmitted by bards who knew the story by heart and used a

compositional technique which allowed them to recreate and recite the story in different versions over and over again. It is therefore hardly surprising that we have a manuscript tradition with a very large number of textual variants. In classical text criticism, the editor tries through collation of manuscripts to establish a text which is as close to the author's autograph as possible. But the Mahabharata does not have an author (apart from the mythical Vyasa), and Sukthankar points to the fact that there are no clear, objective criteria which enable us to make a choice between data from rivaling recensions, or the earliest forms of the text that we can deduce on the basis of the available material. Sukthankar assumes two such recensions for the Mahabharata which differ markedly with regard to length. Only a few of the variants found in the manuscripts are clearly mistakes that can be corrected with any degree of certainty. Furthermore, the Mahabharata contains a number of short or long sections that are found in one but not the other recension. This may be text added later, or interpolations, but they are usually so competently inserted into the text that it rarely is possible to draw conclusions regarding their status on a contextual basis. Sukthankar furthermore assumes that the various manuscripts have been *contaminated*. This means that manuscripts sometimes were compared to each other, and material copied from one tradition to another. Thus, the transmission of the Mahabharata is polygenous and complex, not uniform and simple. In Sukthankar's opinion, the objective of the editor can only be to reconstruct the oldest possible form of the text on the basis of the available manuscript tradition. There is no *Ur-Mahabharata*, no author's autograph. By and large, it is assumed that the epic found its form some time after 400 CE, but the text has probably been subject to changes and modifications as long as it has been copied.

To the critical reader, the Gita raises two important questions: firstly, did it belong in the Mahabharata originally, or is it a later addition; and secondly, how should its internal structure be understood? Regarding the first question, there are two schools: those who believe the Gita was an independent text eventually adapted for the epic and inserted where it now stands, alternatively, that it was produced at a late date specifically for the epic, but not part of the original epic text. The second school maintains that the text was an original part of the epic. Both views are supported by respected Indologists. The German Indologist M. Winternitz suggests for instance that the Mahabharata originally just had a short dialogue between Arjuna and his charioteer, and that the Gita was an independent work that only later was inserted into the great epic. This position is also supported by Georg von Simson, who tries to show how the Gita was fitted into the original epic battle description. van Buitenen, on

the other hand, claims emphatically that the Gita was “conceived and created in the context of the Mahabharata. It was not an independent text that somehow wandered into the epic.” As for the contents of the Gita, it is seen as consisting of several layers of text, possibly combined when the Gita was composed, possibly introduced gradually with the passage of time. These layers comprise *samkhya*, *yoga* and *bhakti* as well as epic and hymnic material. Under all circumstances, interpolations and reworking of the text at one or more stages are very likely. The Croatian Indologist Mislav Jezic believes that the poetic part of the Gita, written in the *jagati* meter, is older than the didactic parts written in *slokas*, and that the parts that are related to the philosophical systems *samkhya* and *yoga* are older than the parts that are related to Vedantic thinking. Furthermore, he suggests that the part which is based on *bhakti* thinking comes last. In this manner he reconstructs a complex history of the Gita's text. His theory does not allow us to decide whether this assumed process took place before the Gita was inserted into the epic (if it was), or in connection with the Gita being produced as a part of the epic through a gradual process of enlargement. Under all circumstances, Jezic' reconstruction has not met with universal approval from other scholars.

### **The problem of verse I.10**

In verse I.10, the Gita offers us a text critical problem which deserves a closer look. The Poona edition has the following version:

aparyAptaM tad asmAkaM balaM bhISmAbhirakSitam |  
paryAptaM tv idam eteSAM balaM bhImAbhirakSitam ||

That force, protected by Bhishma, is not a match for us,  
but this force, protected by Bhima, is a match for them.

The text as it stands is a paradox. Duryodhana's army was not at all insufficient in number, and Indian commentators were fully aware of this fact. The commentator Vedantadesika suggests that the text is corrupt, and that Bhima and Bhishma have been transposed.

Now Bhaskara's text has in our stanza another reading, which is the oldest available and which eliminates all the problems found in our line. He reads:

aparyAptaM tad asmAkaM balaM bhImAbhirakSitam |  
paryAptaM tv idam eteSAM balaM bhISmAbhirakSitam ||

That force, protected by Bhima, is not a match for us, but this force, protected by Bhishma, is a match for them.

There is no evidence that Bhaskara tampered with his text, and van Buitenen suggests that we should prefer this reading: it has the authority of the most ancient text version; it removes the inexplicable anomaly of *tad* and *idam*; it does justice to the universally accepted superiority of Bhishma to Bhima as a warlord; it fits the tongue of Duryodhana addressing his columns, who are superior in numbers, on the first day of battle, and it explains the recurrence of the same line in what is evidently an exhortatory address by Duryodhana in 6.47. On this argument van Buitenen accepts Bhaskara's reading, with good reason, and I have translated according to this correction.

### Notes on the translation:

The Indic conceptual system is very different from ours, and it is often well-nigh impossible to find English terms that are semantically coextensive with the Indic ones. All translations of technical philosophical terms in Sanskrit are therefore approximations, and many are disputed. A case in point is the simple term *jnana*. This word is frequently translated with “knowledge” and contrasts with the term *vidya*, which according to Alex Wayman should be translated with “wisdom.” However, the exact meaning of a word is also determined by the philosophical and religious context where it is used. A word is not necessarily translated in the same way in two different contexts. Thus, David White translates *jnana* with “wisdom” and *vijnana* with “knowledge,” whereas Wayman translates the latter with “perception” and R. H. Robinson with “knowledge” or “consciousness.” I have chosen to translate *jnana* with “knowledge,” *vijnana* with “discrimination” and *vidya* with “wisdom” or “science,” depending upon context.

It may come as a surprise to many readers that I have translated *yoga* with (mental) discipline and *yogin* with master of discipline rather than keeping the terms *yoga* and *yogi*, which are now normal loan-words in Western languages. I have done so deliberately, because these loan-words to the Western mind necessarily conjures up the image of a *yogi* engaged in the typical *asanas* or postures of classical *yoga*. But this is not the *yoga* we are dealing with in the Gita.

On the other hand, I have chosen to keep the Indic term *brahman* in spite of the fact that it is not a normal loan-word in the West. The reason is that we don't have any term in English that comes really close to *brahman*. Paul Hacker sees it as an “*Urmaterie*”, primeval matter, but this in my opinion brings it too close to *prakriti*. “Primeval energy” may be better,

but not entirely satisfactory either: the pole star, according to Joel Brereton, is identified with the unchanging *brahman*. It is, after all, constant and immovable, and since *brahman* is the same, what would be more natural than projecting it into space. This *brahman*, says a later text, the Hiranyakesi Grihyasutra, is the navel of the universe and the navel of the *pranas* (breaths). In the Vedas it relates especially to the power inherent in the *mantras*. The term is in K. W. Bolle's words quite simply poly-interpretable. I have therefore preferred to give a lengthy explanation of the term *brahman* in this introduction rather than to translate it.

Several Sanskrit terms have an everyday, normal meaning in addition to a technical meaning. As already mentioned, this is the case with *yoga*, but it is also the case with *buddhi*. In a non-technical context, it may be translated with "mind" or "intention". In H. R. Robinson's words, however, in a *Samkhya* context it is cognitive, it is the seat of truth and error, and it knows supersensible entities. In contrast to *manas*, it is remote from the senses, which reach it through *manas*. It is not the ultimate self or the soul but merely a psychic entity. It can be detached from the senses and directed toward the *atman* (soul, spirit). It can be trained to enter yogic trances. Just as it is the highest seat of delusion, it is the faculty that gets beyond delusion. The *buddhi* is also affective and purposive, which makes the translation "intellect" somewhat deficient. In the *Samkhyakarikas*, it is described as ascertainment or determination. However, it also distinguishes things according to their similarities and dissimilarities, which makes it an intellectual function. In the epic part of the Gita, rather than the doctrinal, it seems clear for contextual reasons that *buddhi* refers to attitude or mindset. I have therefore chosen to translate it partly as "mindset" and partly as "intellect", since better solutions don't seem to be on offer. The reader must allow for the fact that such "best fit" solutions are quite common in a Sanskrit translation, and that the only way to get an intimate understanding of a Sanskrit text is to learn Sanskrit. Alternatively, a Sanskrit term may be split into several terms in the target language depending upon how a given context is interpreted by the translator, thus making it difficult for the reader to understand what really goes on in the text. A translation is always an interpretation, but an interpretation is not always a translation.

### **Note on colophons**

Every chapter of the original Sanskrit editions of the Gita is introduced by a headline and rounded off by a so-called colophon, which reiterates the source of the chapter (the Mahabharata, the Bhishma section, the Bhagavadgita etc.) and the chapter headline. These

colophons are traditional, and they give the text a certain *ambiance*. However, the original colophons are highly complex, and it was decided to reduce their size and complexity, turning them into more manageable text sections in order to preserve some of the ancient atmosphere of the text without boring the reader with excessively long repetitions of almost identical texts.

### **The date of the Gita**

Deciding a date for a text which is multi-layered, and which lacks clear internal criteria for dating is immensely difficult. Scholars would tend to accept the following conclusions by Angelica Malinar: the oldest parts of the Gita may go back to the third century BCE, whereas the theistic parts may stem from the middle or end of the 2. century BCE. The chapters XII-XVI may go back to the 1st century CE whereas chapter 17 is possibly even younger. These conclusions would probably hold good regardless of whether we believe that the Gita was a work originally separate from the Mahabharata or that it was conceived as an original part of the great epic.

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