

The Essence of the Bhagavad Gita



“I asked the Divine Mother whom I should take out with me to help me with editing, and your face, Walter, appeared.

“To make extra sure, I asked Her twice more, and each time your face appeared. That’s why I am taking you.”

—Paramhansa Yogananda

The Essence of the Bhagavad Gita

Explained by Paramhansa Yogananda

As Remembered by his disciple
Swami Kriyananda
(J. Donald Walters)



Crystal Clarity Publishers
Nevada City, California

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First edition 2006. Second edition 2007
Printed in Canada

ISBN: 978-1-56589-226-2
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Designed by Crystal Clarity Publishers
Cover illustration is an oil painting by the American artist
Dana Lynne Andersen, Commissioned for this
book, and titled: *The Divine Vision*.



Crystal Clarity Publishers
14618 Tyler Foote Road
Nevada City, CA 95959
800.424.1055 or 530.478.7600
Clarity@crystalclarity.com
www.crystalclarity.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kriyananda, Swami.
The Essence of the Bhagavad Gita / Explained by Paramhansa Yogananda
As Remembered by his disciple, Swami Kriyananda. — 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Previously published: c2006.

Includes indexes.

ISBN 978-1-56589-226-2 (pbk.)

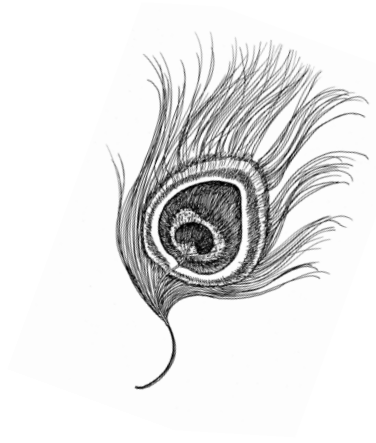
1. Bhagavad gita—Criticism, interpretation, etc. I.
Yogananda, Paramhansa, 1893-1952. II. Title.

BL1138.66.K785 2007

294.5'924046--dc22

2007041749

*Dedicated to
the millions of people who,
my Guru predicted,
would find God through this book*



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FOREWORD

WE ARRIVED IN INDIA FOR A THREE-WEEK VISIT the day Swami Kriyananda began writing this book. He had been struggling for several weeks with the problem of how to approach it.

“My first thought,” he told us, “was to write a slim volume, as in fact I called it in the first introduction I wrote. I had long been wanting to tackle the whole Gita, but that project, though it held paramount importance for me, also frightened me both because of its magnitude and because of its supreme importance. The prospect that your coming,” he said to us, “might possibly disrupt my line of thinking was what ‘put me over the edge,’ in the sense that it brought me to a resolution of my dilemma! I felt I *must* begin work, or else lose whatever clarity I’d arrived at for the project already.”

Actually, it was only a week or more after our arrival that he came to realize that, instead of writing the “brief overview” he’d first intended, he had actually launched (or *been* launched!) on writing the whole Gita.

Throughout our visit, Swamiji, while playing the loving host—chatting with us for hours, going out with us to shops and to dinner—spent all his free time working on this manuscript. In answer to our concern that he must be finding our presence a distraction from this work, he replied, “On the contrary, it is helping me! I find the whole project so awe-inspiring that I’ve felt almost overwhelmed by it. Your presence helps me to approach it simply, one day at a time. Getting feedback from you has helped also, even if it doesn’t clarify ideas I have already fairly clearly in my mind, for at least it keeps my feet on the ground, mentally, while I wrestle with concepts so subtle that I *must* find ways to make them relevant to everyone.” After our departure, others came to visit Swamiji. He kept up the same schedule, and assured them all that their presence, far from distracting him, helped to “ground” him by relating what he was writing to actual needs and realities.

Unbelievably, he finished this work—comprising as it did, in its first draft, six hundred pages—in less than two months! To everyone, himself included, it seemed a miracle.

“Fortunately,” he told us, “I have a very clear memory, and can recall vividly the days I spent in Master’s company, reading his entire manuscript, and helping him with its editing. I said to him at the time, ‘Sir, this is the most wonderful thing I have ever read!’” We too, in reading this manuscript, feel that it is the greatest thing we have ever read. One day, Swamiji said to us, “I feel as though Master were working as I write—not only through me, but *with* me.”

To us, this book—of the some eighty-five books Swami Kriyananda has written in his life—is his masterpiece. That it is inspired will be evident to the reader without our saying so. What author, otherwise—especially one who has always labored hard to make all his thoughts simple and clear—could have finished such a book as this in less than two months?! He himself said to us, “I actually thought I would have to devote ten years of my life to writing this book.” Add to that his present age—he is now in his eightieth year—and what we are discussing amounts almost to a “labor of Hercules.” He told us, “My one fear was that I might not live long enough to see this work completed.”

It was in May, 1950, while he was still twenty-three years old, that his guru, Paramhansa Yogananda, asked him to come over to his retreat to begin work with him on the job of editing his commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita. Swamiji had been staying five miles away, at the monks’ retreat, working on “editing” (he always puts the work he was doing then in quotes, reflecting how young he was at the time!) the Master’s work on *The Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam. The Master had kept Swamiji with him during the first days of his dictation of his Gita commentaries. He had then sent him to work alone, however, while he himself concentrated all his time on his commentaries. Now he was ready to begin working with Swamiji (whom he himself always called “Walter”) on the editing of his new manuscript.

The Master had told his monk disciples in January of that year, when he took “Walter” with him to the desert, “I prayed to Divine Mother and asked Her whom

I should take with me to help with the editing. Your face appeared, Walter. That's why I am taking you."

After completing the manuscript, he asked his young disciple to come over and help him with the editing. For two months they worked together. The day "Walter" came over, his guru exclaimed to him ecstatically, "A new scripture has been born! Millions will find God through this work. Not just thousands—*millions!* I have seen it. I know!"

During this period he told his disciple, "Your job in this life is lecturing, writing, and editing." Later he added, "By editing my words, you yourself will grow spiritually." He then repeated something he had said to him already several times: "You have a great work to do."

It seems clear, in retrospect, that Yogananda knew from the beginning that Kriyananda was destined to edit his Gita commentaries. Yet, despite many indications that the Master knew Kriyananda would do this work, he could not say so at the time: Another editor, much senior to "Walter," was working on it. Meanwhile, Kriyananda was given many other things to do. His guru placed him in charge of the monks and asked him to write letters for him. The young monk ended up doing much reorganizing within his guru's organization, went on widespread lecture tours, taught, and guided the activities of centers throughout the world. Many years were still to pass before all his guru's predictions about his life's work would be fulfilled.

Yogananda must surely have seen that his Gita commentaries would not come out that year, as he wanted them to do. The urgency he expressed for their immediate

release must have been prompted by his knowledge that, if they did not come out during his lifetime, their publication would be delayed for many years. In fact, they finally came out only in 1995—forty-five years after their completion.

During that time, Kriyananda fulfilled all his guru's other predictions. The "great work" the Master had foretold included writing some eighty-five books, composing over 400 pieces of music, and founding seven communities in which, today, some 1,000 people live lives of dedication to God. In addition, he took some 15,000 photographs, many of which have appeared in his published works.

In 1990, after forty years of writing spiritual books, composing spiritual music, and lecturing to and teaching thousands around the world, he felt guided to take up the task of editing his master's words. From then on, he created such books as *The Essence of Self-Realization* (a book of his guru's sayings); *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam Explained* (an edition of Yogananda's writing on the subject); *God Is for Everyone* (a rewrite of Yogananda's book, *The Science of Religion*); and a final book of his guru's sayings, *Conversations with Yogananda*.

In the year 2003, Swamiji felt his guru's call to found a new work in India. He lives now in the land of his guru's birth, has a daily (prerecorded) television program on Aastha station, has written a correspondence course (*Material Success Through Yoga Principles*), and has written several other books, besides. His chief ambition for many years, however, has been to write this book.

“When the first version of this book was finally published in 1995,” he told us, “I was disappointed. I remembered well the material my Guru had dictated in 1950. But how different it was, now, from that original! It lacked the simple beauty and clarity I remembered. It gave repeated evidence of drastic overediting. I longed to offer at his feet a new version of the work he himself had done when I knew him. I don’t have access to the original, but fortunately he has blessed me with a very clear memory. Could I, just possibly, reconstruct from memory what he had done? Certainly I could not recall the actual phrasing, but it astonished me how much I did recall of the context. Perhaps . . . perhaps! Well, I could at least try!”

And so, finally, on October 7, 2005, he felt the time had come to at least begin the work on Paramhansa Yogananda’s Gita commentaries for which his guru had begun to train him during the winter and spring months of 1950—fifty-five years ago. What began as an “overview” soon became a stanza-by-stanza commentary. He skimmed lightly over the published version, primarily as a jog to his own memory, since the labored explanations were not as he remembered them. It was more helpful to him to tune in to the consciousness of Yogananda, which lay beyond what he read.

For us, it was a great blessing to be present in India during the first weeks of this project, which he had finally undertaken. He told us, “Master’s thoughts poured effortlessly into my mind, helping me to fill page after page with deep insights and inspiration.”

With a radiant look on his face, Swami Kriyananda often worked late into the night. Sometimes he began

work again in the early hours, long before dawn. With quiet humility and deep inner joy, he told us who were with him. “I am filled with such bliss as I write, it is hard to think of anything else! I feel the deep delight my Guru takes in this work.” He finished the work on December 5th, less than two months later!

Here, then, is a book that is a living tribute to two of India’s great spiritual contributions to the world: the wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita, and the importance of the guru-disciple relationship. Through a long life of dedication to, and attunement with, his guru, Swami Kriyananda has—we deeply feel—presented the vibrant truth and power of his master’s original explanation of this beloved scripture. Yogananda has guided his disciple’s life and thoughts for nearly sixty years in such a way as to enable him to fulfill that commission, given so many years ago.

It seems to us that this great scripture, known for ages as simply the Bhagavad Gita (the “Lord’s Song”), had to await this age of renewed consciousness that matter is energy, and that the need of religion in this new age is a teaching based both on revelation and on common sense. Now the full story can be told.

As it says in the Bhagavad Gita (10:11), “Out of pure compassion, I, the Divine One who dwells in all, set alight in their hearts the blazing lamp of wisdom.” May you, too, find God’s light within you through this great new revelation of ancient, timeless scripture.

Jyotish and Devi Novak
December 14, 2005



EXPLANATORY NOTE

THE NUMBERS OF THE CHAPTERS IN THIS BOOK HAVE no particular correlation to the eighteen chapter numbers in the Bhagavad Gita itself. In the text that follows, all chapter references are to the Gita, and not to the thirty-one chapters of this commentary.

Thoughts on Pronunciation and Spelling

Sanskrit words that are generally written with a “*jn*” but pronounced with a slightly nasal “*gy*” are treated more phonetically in this book. The following is an excerpt of a conversation I had with my Guru, Paramhansa Yogananda, in 1950. He was going over some of his writings with me when we came upon the word, *gyana* (wisdom). “Jnana,” he remarked, “is how scholars usually write it. I can’t see why. It isn’t pronounced ‘J-nana.’ And how else are you going to pronounce it, if you find it transliterated in that way? This is a simple example of scholarly pedantry.” *Gyana* is more correct, though in pure Sanskrit there is a nasal

sound, which scholars have tried (futilely) to catch, with their “*jnana*.”

“Another transliteration scholars prefer,” my Guru continued, “is to write ‘V’ instead of ‘B.’ Instead of Bibaswat they write ‘Vivaswat.’ Instead of ‘Byasa’ they write ‘Vyasa.’”

In many languages, actually, there is only a slight difference, hardly discernible to foreigners, between the “b” and the “v,” but the “b” sound, for Sanskrit, comes closer to the correct one.

The title “Paramhansa” itself I’ve written as he wrote it. Other editors have inserted another “a” between the “m” and the “h,” insisting that to do so is grammatically correct. As a result, Westerners have come to pronounce that “a” lingeringly. In India, if occasionally pronounced, the sound is almost inaudible. Once again, I have avoided this bit of scholarly pedantry.



PREFACE

Why This Book?

THIS BOOK, WHICH COMES AFTER THE PUBLICATION of Self-Realization Fellowship's (Yogoda Satsanga Society's) *God Talks With Arjuna*, has been written in answer to a publicly expressed need for something simpler and clearer.

The first version was not published until forty-five years after its writing was completed. It is exhaustive and comprehensive. Can a thing be comprehensive, however, and yet not be complete? Certain teachings, and even certain stories, important to me in the original, do not appear in that first published edition.

I should state that I worked personally with Paramhansa Yogananda during the major portion of his writing of this work. He had told the monks in 1950, before he went out to his desert retreat to begin this labor, "I asked Divine Mother whom I should take out there with me to help with the editing, and your face appeared, Walter [the name by which he called me]."

To make extra sure, I asked Her twice more, and each time your face appeared. That’s why I am taking you.”

I read the original manuscript, and worked on it with him (though not extensively). The copy I worked on still exists in SRF’s archives; it contains my handwriting. I was in my early twenties then, however, and a “greenhorn” without proper experience as an editor. Now that I have reached nearly the age of eighty, I might be described as somewhat seasoned in this field—especially with some eighty-five books to (what I hope are) my credit.

What he dictated was fluent, easy to understand, and beautiful. I remember exclaiming to him at the time, “This is the most wonderful work I have ever read!” For many years (since 1995, with SRF’s publication) it has been my deepest desire to present a version that was closer to the original. The actual manuscript, however, is not available to me.

Fortunately, I have an exceptionally clear memory, which I have drawn on in writing other books, most recently *Conversations with Yogananda*. I have also been teaching these truths for nearly sixty years as a devoted disciple of my Guru, and have the teachings, so to speak, “under my belt.” Although I had, of course, to refer to their book, I only skimmed over it lightly. This book is in no way a paraphrase or copy of theirs.

What it represents is my earnest endeavor to reproduce the book I read fifty-five years ago, and loved with all my heart. His was a great work. I have tried to reproduce it in such a way that, I think (and certainly hope), has been pleasing to my Guru, with at least some of its impact

of immediacy. His insights are the most amazing, thrilling, and helpful of any I have ever read on the Bhagavad Gita.



INTRODUCTION

THESE PAGES CONTAIN AN EXPOSITION OF THE hidden meanings in the Bhagavad Gita as they were explained by my great Guru, Paramhansa Yogananda, and (before him) by his line of gurus.

The reader today is confronted by an almost bewildering array of translations and commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita. The very universality of that scripture invites people to see it in terms of their own diverse approaches to truth. Those who by nature are primarily active find wise guidance in the Gita for how to act in such a way as to free themselves of emotional involvement in this world. Those whose natures are primarily rational find in the Gita supreme guidance on the impersonal attitudes needed for living with wise and calm non-attachment. Those of devotional inclination find in the Gita the inspiration to love only God. And those, finally, who seek God through calm meditation find in this scripture deep teachings on right attitudes in meditation.

Truth is one. People try to slice it like a pie, but even the slices of a pie narrow to a single center. What the Gita shows is that, however many aspects there are of truth, all of them radiate outward from a single center.

Yogananda emphasized in his writings, and especially in his commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita, that man is a triune being: physical, mental, and spiritual. All parts of human nature need to be developed, lest any one of them obstruct the others.

My Guru once mentioned to me, with regard to one-sided approaches to the Bhagavad Gita (of which there are many), “Even Swami Shankara, profound though his commentary was, denied the importance of physical reality. What he wrote was overbalanced on the spiritual side. He was right in saying that all things are only an appearance, but it should be added that *in this realm* of appearances *maya* does have its own reality. Everything is a dream, but even dreams, *as dreams*, are real.”

The Bhagavad Gita teaches every important aspect of the spiritual path: during activity, *Karma Yoga* (the yoga of right action); during thinking and discrimination, *Gyana Yoga* (the yoga of wisdom and discrimination); when feeling and experiencing emotion, *Bhakti Yoga* (the yoga of devotion). There is a central teaching in the Bhagavad Gita, however, which unites all paths even as subsidiary streams unite in a larger river.

“That river,” Yogananda said, “is the energy flowing in the spine. The subsidiary paths of yoga offer guidance to people of different basic temperaments: the active, the discriminating, the ‘heartful.’ The central river to

enlightenment, however, is shown by *Raja Yoga*, the royal yoga: the pathway of the spine.

“Raja Yoga,” he continued, “takes one straight up the central pathway of the spine into the inner silence of divine communion. It is the teaching of this yoga, finally, that makes the Bhagavad Gita truly a scripture for all mankind. It is why Krishna stated in the Gita, ‘O Arjuna, be thou a yogi.’”

One thing that sets Paramhansa Yogananda’s commentary apart from others is its all-inclusiveness. He himself said to me after he’d finished writing his commentaries, “I now understand why my Guru told me not to read other commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita. He didn’t want my mind influenced by human opinions. Instead, what he wanted, and what I did, was tune in to Beda Byasa, the author of the Gita. It was Byasa himself who wrote this great scripture through me.”

Over the years since then, I have come to understand more clearly how that great sage, who lived thousands of years ago, might have been able to cross the yawning chasm of time that separates his day from ours. I knew even then that my Guru had not intended a merely poetic image, as if to imply that all he had done was honor the *spirit* of Beda Byasa. Rather, what he did was tune in to the ever-living consciousness of that great sage.

I was able to accept this much without difficulty. The question remained in my mind, however: Did Byasa literally dictate this commentary to Yogananda? Or was the communication effected by some other means?

Superconscious communication is never confined to mere verbal expression; deep intuitions are conveyed,

always, that words alone could never express. In *Autobiography of a Yogi* Yogananda tells of how his great guru, Swami Sri Yukteswar, appeared to him after his own death. His guru, on that occasion, described many details of the astral and causal universes. In Chapter 43 of that book, “The Resurrection of Sri Yukteswar,” Yogananda states, “My mind was now in such perfect attunement with my guru’s that he was conveying his word-pictures to me partly by speech and partly by thought-transference. I was thus quickly receiving his idea-tabloids.”

Masters have direct, inner ways of communicating with one another. I witnessed the effect of such communication many years ago in Sydney, Australia. I had published my edition of Paramhansa Yogananda’s book, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam Explained*. The Theosophical Society of Sydney had invited me to speak about this book to their members. After the lecture, a man in the audience raised his hand and asked about a particular quatrain, and my Guru’s interpretation of it.

“It seems to me,” he said, “that what Yogananda wrote here doesn’t relate clearly to the words of the quatrain itself.”

“I understand your problem,” I replied, “for I faced it several times in editing this book. I would meditate on the quatrain, however, and on my Guru’s explanation of it, and always I saw the connection, no matter how tenuous it seemed at first.”

At this point a lady in the audience raised her hand and stated, “I am from Iran, and I am familiar with ancient Persian. I am also familiar with the particular quatrain

to which this gentleman has referred. His problem is that he is trying to compare the *translation* by Edward FitzGerald to Paramhansa Yogananda's commentary. I agree, that connection is unclear. I've compared his commentary, however, with the original Persian, and I have found that the two, the words of Omar Khayyam and those of Paramhansa Yogananda, correspond exactly."

As I've suggested, superconscious communication is rarely verbal, and is never entirely so. It is instantaneous, conveying deep, direct intuitions that could never be expressed in words alone. Ordinary minds are hemmed in by the intellect, which must ponder the pros and cons of every issue. Most people find it difficult to understand this higher level of communication. The further doubt is natural for them: "If Yogananda's words were inspired by superconsciousness, why have they required editing?" The simple answer is, these are two very different levels of communication. Communication by words is slow and cumbersome, especially if one tries to express himself clearly and exactly. Words have also an endless potential for being misunderstood.

I myself am very familiar with the writing process, having spent more than seventy years trying to hone my ability to convey my meanings in written form. I think of Coleridge's poem, "Kubla Khan"—a *tour de force* of great beauty from which, when I was young, I memorized many passages. This poem however, for all its wonderful rhythm and imagery, in actual fact conveys no message at all! It was a marvelous example of a drug-induced, false inspiration. I, for my part, have tried always to write meaningfully. Generally speaking I have found, in spite of

my most conscientious efforts, that even when the writing has flowed as it were on its own, the job still needed editing. I've had to edit every book I've written, though sometimes very little. Editing is rather like plumbing: fitting words, phrases, and sentences together in such a way as to make the ideas flow smoothly.

Bringing spiritual truths down to the material plane is rather like bringing a diaphanous cloud down to where its vapor becomes a surging, wind-tossed ocean. The very process of descent hems in the process of creativity. When the creative flow is powerful, one cannot give primary attention to perfecting his outward mode of expression. I can understand very well why great masters rarely phrase their words with the care demanded by a careful and elegant stylist. It is for their disciples, usually—if any are competent—to “pick up the pieces.” Indeed, as my Guru himself indicated to me, this would be the way I myself would grow, spiritually.

God Himself created the universe in a comparable manner, by manifesting His consciousness down through the layers of ideas, energy, and subtler levels of matter until the grossest minerals were manifested.

Before dictating, Paramhansa Yogananda would turn his eyes up to the spiritual eye in the forehead. Then, speaking slowly to give his secretary, Dorothy Taylor, the time she needed to type out what he was saying, he spoke as the guidance came to him from within. Seldom did I see him descend from that high divine level to make a comment—or (as he did from time to time) to check what he was doing against another published interpretation by Swami Pranabananda, a liberated disciple of

Lahiri Mahasaya. I imagine that that swamiji's book served him as a means of making sure there wasn't some important detail he might have omitted from what was flowing through him.

When the work was finished, he exclaimed to me again and again, with ecstatic exhilaration and joy, "A new scripture has been born!"

"Millions," he added, "will find God through this work. Not just thousands: millions! I have *seen* it. I *know*!"

I was privileged to read the manuscript, and to help my Guru during the editing process, with which he himself took serious pains. Unlike most philosophical works, this book was, as I expressed it in my autobiography, *The Path*, "fresh and alive, each page a sparkling rill of original insights. With the sure touch of a master teacher, profound truths were lightened occasionally with graceful humor, or with charming and instructive stories, or highlighted with brief touches of new, sometimes startling information. . . . Best of all, the truths expressed in the book were constantly clarified . . . with illustration after illustration."

As my Guru also put it: "This book came entirely from God. It is not philosophy (the mere *love* of wisdom): It *is* wisdom."

Again he exclaimed, with a beatific smile, "A new scripture has been born!"

CHAPTER ONE



WHAT IS THE BHAGAVAD GITA?

THE BHAGAVAD GITA MEANS, “THE SONG OF GOD.” It is indeed a song: a work of art, as well as a deep statement of truth. I would, indeed, call it the perfect scripture. I make that statement as a Westerner, raised in the Christian tradition, though now a devout believer in *Sanaatan Dharma*.

The “Gita,” as it is lovingly called in India, is the most widely known and best loved scripture in India. Concise, profound, poetic, and deeply inspiring, it has been fittingly called “The Hindu Bible,” for it is the definitive statement of the ancient religion of that oldest of all countries on Earth.

The truths taught in the Bhagavad Gita are stated with extraordinary clarity. Interestingly, however, because of their very clarity they open up vast vistas of insight. Hence the value of commentaries on it, of which there have been a large number. There are levels of meaning in the Gita for which the Gita is also an allegory. I base the contents of these pages on the commentaries

by my great Guru, Paramhansa Yogananda. I was with him in 1950, as I said in the Introduction, at his retreat in Twenty-Nine Palms, California, while he dictated a major part of those commentaries.

Paramhansa Yogananda began his writing by stating that the Bhagavad Gita presents the quintessence of India's ancient teachings, of which the oldest and most complete are the voluminous *Vedas*. To understand the Vedas is not easy. As Swami Bharati Krishna Tirtha, the Shankaracharya of Gowardhan Math in Puri, stated, many of their words have changed their meaning over the many centuries since they were first written down. (And they were only written down after the arrival of a lower age, when people could no longer recite the words from memory. The invention of writing was not a sign of civilization's advancement, but of a decline in human awareness that made it necessary to record thoughts in written form.)

Bharati Krishna Tirtha stated that many words of deep meaning have acquired, in time, more superficial meanings. Words do, of course, change. The word, "knave," he pointed out, once meant simply a young man, not a bad one. Indeed, "knave" comes from the German *knabe*, which means "boy." Similarly, then, the word "go" in ancient Sanskrit meant "light," not "cow" as it does today. Western scholars, taking words like this, have made a hash of the inner meaning of the Vedas.

Only people of deep spiritual understanding can penetrate to the heart of those ancient scriptures. The Brahmin caste, who are supposed to be (but seldom

are) deeply versed in the scriptures, often proclaim their traditional scriptural knowledge with names suggestive of their supposed degrees of Vedic scholarship: *Chatturveda* (four Vedas); *Trivedi* (three Vedas); *Dubey* (two Vedas).

A summary of the Vedas is contained in the *Upanishads*. Even these great scriptures are obscure—especially for modern minds.

The quintessence of the *Upanishads*, again, is contained in the Bhagavad Gita. The timeless glory of Sanaatan Dharma, “The Eternal Religion,” which is the ancient and true name of what we know as Hinduism, is most succinctly and movingly revealed in this timeless spiritual masterpiece.

CHAPTER TWO



WHAT IS SANAATAN DHARMA?

SANAATAN DHARMA COMPRISES THOSE TIMELESS truths which are rooted in eternity. They predate the forming of the world, and cannot be confined to any one earthly religion. Sanaatan Dharma embraces, indeed, all of manifested existence. Its manifestation in India is unlike other religions in that it was not a teaching by any one master, but expresses the essence of age-old, revealed wisdom.

Christians consider themselves to possess the only divine revelation, which they name The Holy Bible. This belief shows a misunderstanding of the very word, “revelation.” The Bible, which is a mere *statement*, cannot convey the *experience* of truth, which alone is the real meaning of *revelation*.

Wisdom does not contradict itself. All great masters attain the same vision of truth: one and eternal, which we call God. Divine vision transcends sectarian differences; it is this direct vision of timeless truth which forms the basis of Sanaatan Dharma. That truth reminds man of

who and what he is: a divine soul, forever indestructible. The true purpose of scripture, then, is to show man how to find eternal freedom in God.

Jesus Christ said it for all truth seekers: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) Perfection is the goal of every true religion. Perfection is a state of existence, not of mere belief. The Bhagavad Gita, from this point of view, is a revealed scripture, but it emphasizes the need for *inner revelation*, without which no words can suffice to explain wisdom. Great masters in every religion, having perceived God (the Supreme Being) directly, have emphasized again and again in every language that the Supreme Spirit is the essence of everything there is.

Many true masters have pointed out that there are countless paths to divine attainment. Indeed, the paths may be described as numbering as many as there are human beings in this world. For everyone must begin his search for enlightenment from his own point of understanding, an understanding determined by his human characteristics, which the Bhagavad Gita expounds. Briefly, they are devotion, right action, meditation, and wisdom (or discrimination). The names of the great world religions—of which Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam are the main ones—can be misleading if they are not seen to express the spiritual “needs” of their times. Truth needs to be explained according to the understanding of the people for whom it is taught.

Buddha came at a time when the people had come to depend on Vedic rituals to the point where they

expected divine favors by merely repeating rituals and word-formulae, without any effort devoted to personal purification for self-transformation. Their belief might be classed as mere superstition. Buddha did not speak against the Vedas as such: He spoke against people's excessive dependence on their outward practices.

Jesus Christ came when the Jewish people thought that only by obedience to religious rules—again, without self-purification—would they please God.

Mohammed came to a people who were steeped in superstitious idolatry—again, without belief in the need for self-purification.

Within Hinduism itself, great masters have come repeatedly with the mission of correcting misunderstandings and distortions of the subtle truths of Sanaatan Dharma. Swami Shankaracharya came to correct the misunderstanding prevalent among Buddhists of his time that there is no God. God exists, he declared, but He has no eternal form: He is *Satchidananda*—ever-existing, ever-conscious, ever-new Bliss (as Paramhansa Yogananda translated the term).

In every religion there are various “moods,” as they might be called: deeply meaningful to certain people, less so to others. There is the sad longing for eternity expressed in the Gregorian chants. There is the simple, pure kindness expressed in Buddhism. There is the joyful, powerful, but intensely personal devotion in Hindu chanting. There is the Jewish dedication to living in harmony with God's law. We see in Islam also a heroic surrender to the will of God. All these might be described as coming, in a sense, under the heading of

what Yogananda called the “romance” of religion: the heady spirit in which devotees try to live divine truths, without necessarily knowing what truth, itself, is.

The paths to God vary widely according to the natures of individuals, and only superficially according to their different religious beliefs. Thus, Christians and Buddhists with a devotional nature direct their devotion differently, but the upward flow of energy from the heart is the same. Those with an active, serviceful nature may serve in the name of Jesus Christ, Buddha, or some other great teacher, but the principle of service, rather than centeredness in one’s little self, is the same. People with a discriminating nature develop calmness and dispassion according to their religious systems, but in all cases the wisdom in the attitude they develop is one of calmness and dispassion.

In every case, devotional people of the different religions resemble one another more closely than they do members of their own religions who follow the dissimilar paths of service or of discrimination. Christian monks feel a greater natural affinity with Buddhist or Hindu monks than with fellow Christian householders. The prayers and music, the serviceful attitudes toward others, and calm attitudes of dispassionate wisdom more easily cross the apparent barrier of different religious beliefs within each group than even the differences between them and their fellow religionists.

One extraordinary aspect of the Bhagavad Gita is its universality. Whatever the needs of any particular time or people, this great scripture addresses them all from the highest point of view.

In Hinduism as a whole, indeed, no aspect of the truth is rejected. The Hindu teachings emphasize the universal way of living for high spiritual attainment. The Hindu teachings concern themselves much less with beliefs than with practices. They portray the struggles common to each ego on its long upward journey from ignorance to the light of Self-realization.

Thus, the teaching of the Gita is not specifically Hindu: It is all-embracing. Not only is it completely non-sectarian, but it shows people how even their worldly experiences can help them in the end, spiritually—perhaps after many lifetimes—by weaving the threads of diverse human experience into the vast tapestry that comprises the story of every soul's journey to ultimate perfection in God.

For this journey contains innumerable twists and turns. There is but one guideline that can give it right direction: the polestar of one's own innate divinity. The Bhagavad Gita points in this universally true direction.

CHAPTER THREE



THE ALLEGORY OF THE GITA

THE STORY ON WHICH THE BHAGAVAD GITA IS BASED is a brief episode in the longest epic in the world, the *Mahabharata*. The Gita presents two main characters of that epic, Arjuna and Krishna, as they move between two great armies, ranged for battle on the field of *Kurukshetra*.

Arjuna symbolizes the devotee—the person, that is to say, who seeks divine salvation and union with God. Krishna symbolizes God Himself, the divine Self within every human being. Hence, in the Indian teachings, Self-realization is described as the true goal of all spiritual striving, whatever one's religion. The two concepts, Self-realization and the knowledge of God, are synonymous.

In the story of the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna invites Krishna to be his charioteer. The Bhagavad Gita is the story of the dialogue which takes place as Krishna drives Arjuna in his chariot between the two armies, in response to Arjuna's request to observe the two armies directly.

Arjuna, his brothers the Pandavas, and all the forces on their side symbolize the champions of virtue. The enemy are the Kauravas, cousins of the Pandavas, led by Duryodhana, who has usurped the throne. The confrontation is, as we have said, allegorical—a fact which is suggested by, among other things, Arjuna’s very request. He is the leading general of his army. Would the general of an army request something so apparently foolhardy as to be driven between the ranks of the opposing armies, so close to the enemy, and on the very eve of hostilities? Surely, in practical terms, his request was absurd!

As Krishna and Arjuna pass between the two hosts, Arjuna voices his doubts about the righteousness of the forthcoming war. “It would mean destroying my own kinsmen!” he exclaims. “How can I commit such a sin?” Krishna replies to this very understandable doubt, dispelling it. He then proceeds to expound the essence of the teachings of Sanaatan Dharma itself.

Obviously, this account is allegorical. The opposing armies represent the opposition within every unenlightened human being between his upward- and his downward-inclining tendencies. The upward tendencies are his good qualities; the downward ones are those which induce him to seek delusion, or evil. The war of Kurukshetra does not take place literally on any battlefield, though the field of Kurukshetra actually still exists in India. That historic site, and the story that grew out of the war, represent the eternal conflict within man himself.

At the same time, the truths propounded in the Gita are applicable at all levels of life: material, mental, emotional, and spiritual.

Paramhansa Yogananda makes the point that every great scripture is multi-leveled, addressing the vast variety of human needs from a standpoint of divine wisdom. Thus, Krishna's teaching is also true in a literal sense, for it urges the need for courage in righteous warfare. For righteous causes do of course exist.

Krishna turns a righteous outward cause, however, into a description of the eternal conflict within all men between high aspiration and ego-indulgence. In a deeper sense, the war of Kurukshetra is the unending struggle in the mind between good and evil. Its end lies only in final liberation. Krishna himself makes clear the allegorical nature of his timeless dialogue with Arjuna. In a later chapter of the Gita he states, "*This body is the battlefield.*"

Arjuna, seeing the enemy up close, confronts the distressing fact that many of those he is about to fight are members of his own family! After all, the Pandavas grew up side by side with their cousins, the Kauravas. They studied under the same teacher, Dronacharya. As children, they played together, argued and squabbled together—after the manner of growing boys everywhere. The bonds they formed, though not all of them friendly, were nevertheless deep and strong.

The first chapter of the Gita is not, as most commentators have considered it, a mere description of the leading warriors on both sides of a coming conflict. They are the opposing forces within human nature itself. Their very names, traced to their Sanskrit roots, become the names of psychological qualities.

Those opposing Arjuna, therefore, are his cousins, well known to him, even loved by him. The *Mahabharata*

is the full story behind this impending war, telling how the material desires and the ambition of Arjuna's oldest cousin, Duryodhana, head of the Kauravas, forced the conflict by refusing the Pandavas their throne, which was theirs by right. Now Arjuna, seeing these two related families geared up for mutual destruction, laments the need to fight at all. "Surely," he cries out to Krishna, "it would be a sin to slay my own kith and kin! Would it not be more just for me to surrender our kingdom?"

This war is no mere conflict of ambition, however. It is described in the *Mahabharata* as a righteous war between good and evil. Were Duryodhana, who usurped the throne, to remain the king, the people would suffer under his unrighteous rule. The war of Kurukshetra, which is to begin on the morrow, will pit high principles against proud ambition, and soul-aspiration against qualities in human nature that keep the ego in bondage to delusion.

Krishna comforts Arjuna in his distress. Death itself, he assures him, would be preferable to a life spent in unrighteousness. At stake here is not mere physical life or death. Pitted against each other are the life of the spirit and the abandonment of those qualities which lead to soul-bliss. Death of the body, Krishna reminds Arjuna, is nothing: the mere doffing of a garment. It doesn't affect a person's consciousness, which continues throughout eternity. To reject spiritual principles, however, means to embrace spiritual death. "Fight!" Krishna urges his disciple. The war is not one of mortal, physical combat, but of courageous inner struggle toward the victory of soul principles over spiritual sloth and material ease. This is the first and central message of the Bhagavad Gita.

Krishna goes on to say that there are several paths to God, according, not to people's beliefs, but to each person's own temperament. He delineates the right attitudes for the devotee, the various delusions that can prevent him from finding God, and the way to overcome them. In one supreme chapter is explained, in a highly metaphorical manner, the supernal experience of God.

Although the battle setting is allegorical, the advice given in this scripture may be taken as valid for every level of life, including righteous warfare. A true scripture, Paramhansa Yogananda stated, addresses human needs in their entirety.

The story of the *Mahabharata* is also, in fact, historical, and although many of the characters in it are fictional, others actually lived on Earth. In historical fiction today it is common to include known historical figures, to lend verisimilitude to the story. Byasa (or Vyasa), the author of the *Mahabharata*, differed from this technique primarily in making his main characters the historical characters, while his lesser ones served to demonstrate the great array of characteristics in human nature. His main characters lived, as I say, historically. They include the Pandava brothers (Yudhisthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva), some of the Kauravas, and a number of others. The rest of the characters Byasa fictionalized, and presented episodes in their lives in such a way as to conform to the allegory he was weaving like a tapestry.

The over-all theme of this great epic is the soul's first separation, aeons ago, from God: the soul's long voyage through the barren land of delusion; and its final return,

after countless trials and tribulations, to the Great Source of all life. This is the story through which every soul must pass, once it enters upon the outward path of life and once it chooses to follow the inward path of divine awakening.

The war of Kurukshetra describes the soul's final struggle to become liberated from the clutches of *maya*, or delusion. The war itself, though also a historical event, illustrates the struggle with which every spiritual aspirant, sooner or later, is faced.

CHAPTER FOUR



ALLEGORY IN SCRIPTURE

THE MIXTURE OF FACT AND FICTION FOR ALLEGORICAL purposes is common in scripture. It suggests the same blend in life itself: the dreamlike quality of life on earth mixed with the deep truths of the soul. An example of this literary device may be seen in the Book of *Exodus* of the Bible, and the Jewish people's escape from years of bondage in Egypt. Their escape is a historical fact. In *Exodus*, however, the details of that escape are elaborated on, and contain much allegory. *Exodus* describes the Jews, for example, as wandering for forty years in the Sinai desert. Surely they cannot have literally spent forty years in that search. A simple glance at the map of the area shows a desert far too small for such a long trek—unless, indeed, the whole people were under a dense cloud of delusion. To believe that it took the Jews forty years to cross it demands too great a stretch of the imagination! The time can only have been so stated deliberately in order to suggest a deeper meaning behind the quest for the Promised Land.

Wilderness, in spiritual writings, is often used allegorically to describe the inner silence, enjoyed in soul-communion. In that silence, no cultivated flowers of sense-pleasure bloom. The forty-year journey through the Sinai desert describes the long quest required to attain spiritual enlightenment.

In *Exodus*, all who had been born in captivity had to die before the new generation could enter the Promised Land. The meaning, here, is that every characteristic that was born in the “captivity” of ego-consciousness needs to be transcended. Only soul-qualities, developed in the expansion of divine communion, are able to enter the Eternal Kingdom. The Promised Land described in the Bible is union with God: the land of Cosmic consciousness.

Delusive qualities, born of ego-consciousness, are rooted in the consciousness of separateness from God. The ego is not the true Self. All of us are made in the image of God. The Bible, in the first chapter of the Gospel of St. John, tells us that we are all the sons of God. If we define ourselves as being different from Him, we must transcend this self-definition before we, as pure souls, can enter into the divine realm. Such egoic qualities as selfishness, hatred, passion, greed, personal ambition, covetousness, jealousy, and anger are weights that prevent the balloon of awareness from soaring up into the sky of Spirit. St. John therefore tells us also, “No man hath seen God at any time.” Never, in other words, by human, egoic consciousness can the Divine be perceived. The divine truth is far above human realities. As the Bible states also, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.”*

* Isaiah 55:8.

The Promised Land is the reward bestowed, eventually, on all who seek God earnestly. *Exodus* contains an esoteric hint which reinforces this truth. The Promised Land is described as a “land of milk and honey.” The Bible tells us, “And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt . . . , and I am come down to deliver them . . . and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.”*

Indeed, certain aspects of the spiritual path are subtler than ordinary knowledge—that is, than what can be comprehended by anyone who lacks personal experience of inner realities. Those aspects are familiar, however, to yogis and to others who meditate deeply. These truths are hinted at in both the Bible and the Bhagavad Gita.

Let us consider momentarily this specific anecdote in the Bible. In deep ecstasy it so happens that the tongue turns automatically upward toward the brain. At the tip of the tongue there is a positive magnetism which, when united with its negative complement in the nasal cavity, “short-circuits” (in a manner of speaking) the flow of energy in the body and keeps it in the brain. With this physical union is formed a kind of “nectar,” described by yogis as the inner counterpart of outer sexual union. The Hindu scriptures describe this nectar as having the taste of a blend of clarified butter, or *ghee*—milk in its purest form—and honey. The Hindu Vedas named this “nectar,” *soma*. An entire scripture was named *Soma Veda*. This *soma* nectar is able to sustain the body for

* Exodus 3:7,8.

long periods of time while the soul remains rapt in ecstasy, known in the yoga teachings as *samadhi*.

The Promised Land, then, is no mere earthly location. Israel symbolized the soul's true land: Cosmic consciousness.

It must be stated here that the Jews were not, as a whole race, the chosen people of God. For of course there were and always have been good Jews and bad Jews: the same mix that one encounters everywhere on earth of saints and sinners. The Jews in this story symbolize the sincere aspirants in every country and religion who forsake sense-slavery, and commit themselves to realizing the kingdom of God within. As Paramhansa Yogananda often put it, "God chooses those who choose Him."

The story of Moses and the exodus of the Jews from Egypt contains other mystical symbols as well, yogic in nature since they relate to truths more often considered part of the yoga teachings. Moses, for example, is described as raising the serpent power of *Kundalini*: "And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived."* Here two kinds of serpent energy are described: the downward moving force, which draws the consciousness toward worldly and sensual indulgence; and the upward flow, which liberates one's consciousness from delusion.

* Numbers 21:8,9.

The “pole” described here is the spine. Many swamis in India carry a *danda*, which is a staff they use to remind themselves to remain ever centered in the spine. This “pole,” so described in the story of Moses, is made of brass. The serpent upon it is fiery, suggestive of the inner light which ascends with spiritual wakening. Only when this light, or Kundalini energy, is uplifted can the “poison bite” of delusion be healed.

Thus, Jesus Christ said also, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the son of man be lifted up.” (John 3:14) Jesus was not speaking of his coming death on the cross. That was an event which no one, as yet, could anticipate. It had to be a later commentator, therefore, who suggested this meaning. What Jesus was saying, rather, was that *human consciousness* must be lifted up, even as Moses lifted up his own consciousness in the “wilderness” of inner silence, by raising the power of Kundalini in the spine.

The present author once asked Paramhansa Yogananda whether Moses was a spiritual master. “Yes, certainly,” Yogananda replied in an affirmative tone of voice. “The Bible says he ‘lifted up the serpent [that is, the Kundalini power] in the wilderness.’”

These brief excerpts from the Bible are offered here to prepare the reader, especially if he is Jewish or Christian, for similarly deep teachings in the Bhagavad Gita. Even Hindus, after pondering the universality of those teachings, may find it easier to relate to the deeper aspects of this great Hindu scripture.

CHAPTER FIVE



THE GENESIS OF THE STORY

THE KEY FIGURE OF THE MAHABHARATA, AND therefore of the Bhagavad Gita, is Lord Krishna, whose actual life is shrouded in legend. That he was a real person in history is certain; the basic facts of his life are known. The legends, however—his boyhood days, for example, among the gopis and gopals (cowherd girls and boys) of Brindaban—should be taken as allegories.

There is, for instance, the story of when his foster mother, Yasoda, wanted to tie him up, as a little child, to keep him from getting into mischief. (He loved to steal fresh cheese from the kitchen!) She took a length of string which she thought was quite long enough for the job. Inexplicably, it proved too short. She fetched another length and tied it to the first string. This extension, too, proved insufficient! Several more lengths were added. No matter how long the string was, it was not enough to do the job. At last she understood her mistake: The Infinite cannot be tied by anything! How can the human

mind encompass God's vastness? Humbly, then, Yasoda prayed to Bala (the little boy) Krishna, "Lord, please let me tie You so that I can finish my chores!" Sweetly then, on being so prayerfully addressed, the divine child let her have her way.

Obviously this story is allegorical. Even if it had really happened, it would be allegorical in the sense of containing deep meaning. When all of the boyhood stories about Krishna are added up, it becomes clear that they were meant to instruct devotees rather than to report actual, historical events.

The entire epic of the *Mahabharata* is, similarly, one long allegory. For the purposes of this present volume it would be confusing to condense the over-all story of that extremely long and complex epic, which describes the descent of Spirit into the ego and the delusion of separateness—from God, from other egos, and from everything—and the struggle to rise again into oneness with Spirit. Suffice it here to give a brief overview.

The Pandavas were the children of Pandu: the oldest three, the offspring of Pandu and Kunti; the two youngest, of Pandu and Madri. The main characters in the epic actually lived. Bada Byasa wove his allegory around actual people and events in history. Lesser characters, however, had no historical counterparts. They represent psychological qualities in man.

Pandu represents the discriminating intelligence, or *buddhi*. He is described as being white in color (his name derives from *pand*, or "white"). White is intended metaphorically to signify purity; a pure intelligence demonstrates clear discrimination.

Kunti, the mother of the first three Pandavas, represents “the power of dispassion.” Her three sons, born of Pandu, are Yudhishthira (divine calmness), Bhima (control of the life force, or *prana*), and Arjuna (self-control).

Madri, the mother of the two youngest Pandavas, who are twins, represents “the power of attachment to dispassion.”

To understand why there were two mothers for the five Pandavas, it is necessary to be familiar with the symbolism involved here. Each of the Pandavas stands for one of the five chakras, or spinal centers. The yoga teachings explain—as is explained at length in *God Talks With Arjuna*—that the path of divine awakening is, as I’ve indicated, the spine. Energy enters the body through the medulla oblongata at the base of the brain. From this point the sperm and ovum, after uniting, begin the process of creating the embryo. Energy, which then solidifies as matter, passes through the nerves (after creating them) into the brain, down the spine, and out to form the body. When the consciousness withdraws from the body at death, the energy withdraws first from the extremities to the spine, then up the spine, and at last emerges through the medulla oblongata again, leaving the body.

In ecstatic meditation, the yogi (or saint, as he would be called in other religions) withdraws his energy and consciousness by the same route. Deep meditation is a process of “dying” consciously—with the possibility, however, of returning to the body after meditation and resuming its normal activities. As St. Paul declared in the New Testament of the Bible (Paramhansa Yogananda often quoted this passage), “I die daily.”

As the yogi withdraws his energy and consciousness from the senses into the spine, he seeks to raise them up the spine to the brain. A curious difference occurs in the brain between the superconscious yogi, or saint, and the unenlightened worldly person. The medulla oblongata has two poles, a negative and a positive. The negative pole (the *agya chakra*) is in the medulla itself. The positive pole—reflecting the medulla—is the *Kutastha*, the spiritual eye between the eyebrows.

The unenlightened man sinks back, at death, into the negative sleep state. He must swim the waters of *lethe*, as the ancient Greeks called it: the waters of forgetfulness. After a time he may, if he is not wholly materialistic, awake in the astral world and for a time enjoy its beauties to varying degrees, before material desire draws him back to earth again, to reincarnate in a physical body. Questions of the degrees of enjoyment in the astral world must be shelved for a later discussion. For now, we are concerned with the spinal highway to enlightenment.

The yogi who can fix his concentration on the spiritual eye leaves his body consciously, whether in deep ecstasy or in death. Is the spiritual eye, one may ask, merely symbolic? No, it is actually beheld, and is, in fact, a reflection of the light in the medulla, through which the energy moves down the spine in three *naḍis*, or subtle channels of life force, called the *sushumna*, the *vajra*, and the *chitra*. The *brahmanāḍi* is the “spine” of the causal body, so called because it is the primal channel through which Brahman—the divine consciousness—descended into the body. The spiritual eye,

when seen clearly, is universally the same: a field of dark blue light surrounded by a golden halo, in the center of which is a five-pointed star. The golden aureole represents the astral world; the blue field inside it, the causal world and also the omnipresent Christ consciousness; the star in the center, the Spirit beyond creation.

Paramhansa Yogananda pointed out that man is made, as the Bible says, in the image of God, because that five-pointed star resembles the body of man: With parted legs, and the arms stretched out to the side, the head at the top, man has the very shape of that star. Symbolically (it should be added) a five-pointed star with the fifth point turned downward is inauspicious.

The spine is the primary channel through which the energy flows. The energy's upward flow is blocked by certain plexuses in the spine, from which energy flows out into the nervous system, and through that system into the body, sustaining and activating the different body parts. When the yogi in deep meditation withdraws his energy from the outer body to the spine, and then up the spine to the brain, he finds that passage blocked by the outward flow of energy from those plexuses (called centers in English translations of the yoga treatises; in their Sanskrit original they are called chakras). The energy at each chakra must be withdrawn into the spine in order to continue its upward journey.

Each of the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata* represents one of the spinal chakras—from the base up to the medulla oblongata. In the allegory, Draupadi represents the Kundalini power. Draupadi, through a concatenation of circumstances (not necessary to be described

here), becomes the wife of all five of the Pandava brothers. What, then, is Kundalini?

As the energy enters the body and descends the spine, it becomes locked, so to speak, at the lowest pole (its opposite pole being the *anahata chakra* in the heart). In order for the energy to be raised in the spine, Kundalini must first be “awakened”—that is to say, its grip on matter-consciousness must be released. The strength of that hold is determined by the degree of material attachment in the mind. Non-attachment to matter frees the energy to rise up the spine. As it then passes through each chakra, it finds itself blocked as if by a “closed” door. The blockage is caused by energy’s outward flow through those plexuses. The rising Kundalini must spiritually “awaken” each chakra. As the portal of that chakra is opened, a fresh surge of awareness and spiritual power is released, enhancing one’s clarity of awareness.

In the *muladhara*, or coccyx center (the lowest chakra in the spine), the awakened energy, as it moves upward after being awakened by Kundalini, is symbolized by the youngest of the Pandava sons, Sahadeva.

The next chakra upward, the *swadisthana* or sacral center, is symbolized in its upward-moving energy by Nakula, the older of the twin brothers. These two twins are the offspring of Pandu and Madri, Madri representing “the power of attachment to dispassion.”

From the second chakra, once awakened, the energy flows up through each of the higher chakras, the awakened energy of which is symbolized by the sons of Pandu and Kunti—Kunti representing “the power of dispassion.” The difference between the qualities of Madri

(the power of attachment to dispassion) and Kunti (the power of dispassion) is the degree of ego-involvement. In attachment to dispassion there is more of the lower thought, “*I am dispassionate*”; in dispassion itself there is the abstract quality, without a personal sense of “doership.”

As the energy flows upward from the *swadisthana*, or sacral center, it is again impeded in the *manipura*, or lumbar center opposite the navel. This chakra is symbolized by Arjuna. The next chakra upward is *anahata*, the heart (or dorsal) center, which is symbolized by Bhima. Finally, the last and highest chakra in the spine is *bishuddha*, the cervical center, symbolized by Yudhishthira.

Each chakra, when it has been awakened, bestows with that awakening a certain spiritual insight. Sahadeva, the upward-moving energy in the lowest chakra, bestows the divine power of resistance (to temptation). Nakula, the rising energy in the next chakra, bestows the power of adherence to virtue. These two qualities are the *yamas* and *niyamas* listed by Patanjali in his eight-limbed path to enlightenment: the power to avoid wrong action, and the power to cling to right action. These two powers form an essential foundation for any serious spiritual development.

Arjuna, the “Prince of devotees” as he is called by Krishna in the Gita, resides in the *manipura* or lumbar center, and represents fiery self-control. This self-control develops when the yogi is able to follow the proscriptive and prescriptive rules of the spiritual path.

Bhima, the second-oldest brother, represents the heart quality and, also, control of the life force. In the

Srimad Bhagavatam, another deep scripture by the same author, Beda Byasa, the devotee is told during meditation to visualize his heart as a lotus. He should mentally turn the petals upward, to enable their energy to flow up toward the brain. The desires of man are centered in the heart. The yogi must direct every ray of desire-energy upward in divine aspiration to the spiritual eye between the eyebrows.

The highest of the spinal chakras is the *bishuddha* or cervical center, just behind the throat. When the energy gathered at this point is directed upward, the mind acquires divine calmness and expansion. Here is represented Yudhisthira, the oldest of the Pandava brothers.

The young twins, offspring of Pandu and Madri, representing the ego wholesomely directed toward inner freedom, provide support to the aspiring yogi for his spiritual practices. The three older brothers, sons of Pandu and Kunti (the power of dispassion), provide dynamic strength and inspiration for inner, spiritual upliftment.

Thus, it is important from the beginning to understand that the Bhagavad Gita, and the *Mahabharata* on which it is based, provide deep spiritual guidance and inspiration. It is much more than a scripture of pious maxims, but a deep, practical guide to the attainment of union with God.

Were it even a guide to mere goodness however, and to the way to live spiritually in the work-a-day world, it would already be a great and important scripture. What makes the Bhagavad Gita so outstandingly helpful on the spiritual path is that it offers guidance on many levels, as we shall see in the pages that follow.

CHAPTER SIX



WHY COUSINS? WHY ENEMIES?

THE DESCENT OF SPIRIT INTO MATTER IS EXPLAINED allegorically with great care in the *Mahabharata*. Here we bypass much of the elaborate symbolism of that descent, since it predates the story of the Bhagavad Gita. Instead, we shall begin at that point where we ourselves, as human beings, enter upon the scene. For this great scripture is a work, not of history, but of human spiritual development. Man's actual need, as explained in the Bhagavad Gita, is not to understand how he got into delusion, but rather to understand how he can get *out of* delusion.

Dhritarashtra, the father of the Kauravas or Kurus, has Ambika (Negative Doubt) for his mother. He is born blind, as one is, spiritually, when his understanding comes to him only through the senses. Pandu, the father of the five Pandavas, is born of Ambalika, co-wife with Ambika, who represents the positive, discriminating faculty.

These, the two wives of Bichitrabirya (the divine ego, or sense of divine individuality), are the balancing

opposites to one another: Negative Doubt pitted against the Positive Faculty of Discrimination. Dhritarashtra (the blind mind) through his first wife, Gandhari (symbolizing the power of desire) begets Duryodhana and his ninety-nine brothers. (Dhritarashtra's second wife, Vaishya, symbolizes the attachments that are formed in consequence of desires; these give birth to Yuyutsu, who represents the eagerness to do active battle in order to protect one's selfish desires.)

Duryodhana, the first son of Gandhari, represents ego-inspired desires. Paramhansa Yogananda in his Gita commentaries called him King Material Desire. All the sense tendencies are subordinate to the ego's supreme desire to feed its own importance.

Pandu is Ambalika's son. Ambalika, remember, represents the positive discriminating faculty. Thus, Pandu symbolizes the active application of that positive faculty: that is to say, the positive, discriminating intelligence.

The Kurus, or Kauravas, children of Dhritarashtra (the blind mind), are first cousins to the Pandavas (the children of Pandu). Theirs is a cousinly relationship, for they are offspring of the same human consciousness. They are also enemies, however, for their interests are in diametric opposition to one another's.

The field of battle is, as I said, the spine. Here the war rages between the downward-moving tendencies (on the one hand), which take one's consciousness outward into the world of the senses, and those tendencies (on the other hand) which lift man's consciousness toward his true source in Spirit. That these two forces flow in

opposite directions in the spine can be observed in many common realities of life.

Many of the words people use show these differences. Probably there are equivalents in all languages to the expressions in English, “I feel uplifted”; “I feel high”—or, “I’m feeling downcast”; “I feel low.” In Italian (to take one example) these expressions translate as, “*Mi sento su*, [I feel up, or high]” and, “*Mi sento giù* [I feel down].” These words owe their existence to simple facts of human nature: When the energy and consciousness rise in the spine, one feels happy; when the energy and consciousness move downward, one feels depressed or unhappy.

When one’s feelings impel him to indulge in material desires, his energy flows downward in the spine, and then outward from it—into, and through, the senses. Spiritual inspiration uplifts both energy and consciousness in the spine, directing them toward the spiritual eye. In either case the energy is the same, and influences the self-same consciousness. Negative characteristics, such as hatred, jealousy, anger, and lust, form part of the same “family” of consciousness as those qualities which, being positive, lift the awareness heavenward. Such positive characteristics, or qualities, include love, kindness, forgiveness, compassion, and self-control.

Most people have a mixture of positive and negative qualities. They identify, in their egos, with both groups.

The Bhagavad Gita presents a fascinating picture of human nature. It shows that every individual is a nation unto himself, his “population” consisting of all his qualities, both good and bad. Verily, every human quality may with perfect justification be likened to an individual.

In essence, none of us is his characteristics: We merely manifest our character traits. As Paramhansa Yogananda wrote in *Autobiography of a Yogi*, “Thoughts are universally and not individually rooted.” Different characteristics develop in us according to the way we act and react repeatedly in this world in response to people and circumstances. No one, in his true nature, is *essentially* angry or jealous or lustful. He allows these qualities to develop in himself by identifying his ego with things that happen to him in his life.

If his ego feels threatened, and he considers that he must meet that threat with aggressive courage, he may gradually develop both those qualities: aggressiveness and courage. If, on the other hand, he considers himself unable to meet the threat successfully, he may gradually develop a fearful outlook, or become jealous, or acquire a resentful attitude. Over time, the innumerable experiences he encounters in life, and *the way he encounters them*, may develop in him innumerable “complexes.” In other words, certain aspects of his nature may insist on attack, while other aspects plead, tortoise-like, for a self-protective withdrawal. Still others may mutter helplessly in the background about “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” while still others spread a whispering campaign of malicious gossip to get “the world” to side with them, while another whole group of mental citizens may stand, figuratively speaking, on soapboxes pleading for tolerance, forbearance, amused acceptance, or calm non-attachment.

“Circumstances,” Paramhansa Yogananda commented, “are always neutral. They appear positive or

negative according to the corresponding reactions of the heart.” The possible reactions to virtually every circumstance are legion in number. Every reaction may (and does, for most people) seem passing and not binding on one’s self or on one’s nature. People—to give an example—may say something unkind about others, then chuckle lightly as if to imply, “See? my unkind words haven’t affected me personally!” Action never takes place in a vacuum, however. Every act, every *thought*, has its specific consequences.

There is another aspect to human nature, which forces passing thoughts to become imbedded as firm characteristics. This is the power of habit. Thus, in the *Mahabharata*, and in that relatively brief excerpt from it called the Bhagavad Gita, there is the fascinating role played by Drona, who is known also as Dronacharya (*acharya* meaning “teacher”).

Dronacharya was the guru, or teacher, of both the Kurus and the Pandavas. His role in the epic was to teach them the martial arts, including that most important skill of his time: archery.

The bow, in the *Mahabharata*, symbolizes the spine. When a bow is strung, the string resembles the spine itself; the arched front looks somewhat like the front of the body. The arrow, as it is loosed from the bow, symbolizes the power of concentration. In this respect one can visualize also the eyebrows as the two curving halves of a bow, wherein the point between them stands for that part of the bow where the arrow is firmly placed.

Dronacharya’s best pupil was Arjuna. There is a story about Drona’s proposing a test for his students. He asked

them, each in turn, to strike off the head of a bird seated on the highest limb of a tree. Each pupil, as he approached the teacher, was asked, “What do you see?”

Each reported the many things within his range of vision. A typical answer was, “I see the bird, the tree, the passing clouds.” Dronacharya knew, in each case, that the archer would miss the head of the bird. In fact, so it proved.

Finally, Arjuna stepped up for his turn. “What do you see?” asked Drona.

“I see the head of the bird,” replied the young warrior.

“Nothing else?” asked the Guru.

“Nothing else!” came the answer: “only the head of the bird.”

“Loose your shaft!” said Dronacharya proudly, certain of Arjuna’s success. Arjuna alone passed the test.

Dronacharya was, as I have indicated, the guru of both the cousinly families. In the war of Kurukshetra, however, he fought on the side of the Kurus. Why, one wonders, would he do that? Wasn’t Arjuna his best and favorite pupil? There is a subtle reason for that choice.

Psychologically, what happens in any struggle between high aspirations in oneself and one’s worldly tendencies is that habit sides with worldliness. Our need is to replace our bad habits with good ones. Good habits, however, yield to a higher power, which is what gives us our true strength.

The power to concentrate, shown by Arjuna, and all other good qualities needed for spiritual development, depend initially on good habits. What gives those good

qualities their real strength, however, transcends habit: It is a strength that comes from superconscious inspiration. Thus, it isn't so much our good habits that guarantee our spiritual victory as the inflow of divine grace, guidance, and intuition. Meanwhile, the power of habit itself usually ranges itself on the negative side. Indeed, even good habits need to be transformed by divine inspiration; otherwise, if one lacks a higher understanding, he may slip back again into bad habits.

Drona sided with the wrong side. This means we should not depend on our good habits alone to see us through psychological and spiritual tests. Habit born of past actions may give us good karma, but karma itself must be transcended in dedication to the truth.

Meanwhile, all our qualities assume the characteristics of individual personalities, as we become steeped in them by a repetition of the acts that involve us in them. Because of habit, they become entrenched as true "citizens" of our own nation of consciousness. Each person, as I said, is a nation unto himself. Thousands or millions of "citizens" mill about, each one bent on fulfilling his own desires and ambitions. Sigmund Freud hardly scratched the surface of human psychology with his investigations. He worked primarily with abnormal psychology, but in truth every human being, so long as he lives in delusion, is a mass of conflicting qualities, or complexes. Freud saw only the conflict between personal desire and the expectations of society. In reality the case is infinitely more complex.

CHAPTER SEVEN



THE SPINE: PATHWAY TO SALVATION

THINK OF A BAR MAGNET. WHAT DIFFERENTIATES it from other bars of metal—of iron, particularly—is that its molecules are turned in a single direction, producing a north-south polarity. In most bars, the molecules, each with its own north-south polarity, are turned every which way, in effect canceling one another out. It is when the molecules are oriented in one direction that, with many of them acting together, they acquire magnetic power. Magnetism is *generated*, not created. Its presence is latent in every piece of metal—indeed, on subtler levels of manifestation, in everything. Thus, people can be magnetic; their magnetism can cause others to feel toward them a strong attraction or repulsion.

There are many kinds of magnetism. Our individual qualities resemble the iron molecules in the sense that, if they are focused on a single goal, they can produce seemingly miraculous results. On the other hand, when they are directed haphazardly they can render us ineffective. Magnetism is the key to success in everything.

People will often say, “I keep trying to be good. Why, then, do I constantly fail?” or, “I work so hard to become competent in my own field of endeavor; why can I not succeed?” or, “I try so hard to overcome my bad habits; why do they keep on coming back, like weeds?” To all of these questions the answer, while perhaps unfortunate, is, “You have created failure magnetism in yourself: You need to get enough of the citizens among your inner population to support you; then only will you be able to make the over-all change you desire. The good side of the problem is that, when you succeed in converting enough mental citizens to the side of goodness, they will outnumber the unruly ones and will gradually win them over, resulting in your rapid spiritual progress.”

We must transform our faults into virtues. Angry outbursts, uncontrollable at first, need to be rechanneled into positive behavior. Incarnations—many of them, perhaps—may be required for complete self-transformation. Nevertheless, a journey of thousands of miles must begin with a single step. Never should one become discouraged. Discouragement itself is simply a characteristic to be fought and conquered by the steady, indomitable pressure of resolute courage. If one thinks, “I simply don’t have that kind of courage,” know that you *can* develop it, in time. Every human trait begins as a simple thought. There is nothing man can achieve or even conceive that, as an idea, is inaccessible to any other human being.

The Bhagavad Gita, however, teaches more than the need to overcome our individual faults and weaknesses. It also gives practical methods for sweeping every obstacle out of the way. One such method is described in

Chapter 4, Verse 35, where Krishna tells Arjuna of the importance of the guru, or spiritual savior. A guru is more than merely a teacher. The power of the guru can transfer his magnetism to disciples who tune in to his consciousness. Thus, his magnetism can help to transform every fault in them into its opposite virtue, by rechanneling the energy in their spines—in a sense realigning the “molecules” of tendencies and helping them, ever increasingly, to flow upward. A river, when its flow is strong, dissolves any eddies lingering along the bank, and causes those eddies and any debris swirling in them to enter the river’s powerful flow down to the ocean. In similar fashion, a strong upward flow of energy in the spine can dissolve all the “*vrittis*,” or eddies of feeling, and carry them up to the spiritual eye. Hence Patanjali’s definition of yoga: “*Yogas chitta vritti nirodha* (Yoga is the neutralization of the eddies, or whirlpools, of feeling in the consciousness).” The subtle help of a true, or *Sat*, guru can help the disciple to transform his own tendencies and direct them all toward God.

None of this can be accomplished, however, without the disciple’s active cooperation. This process, too, can be hastened scientifically by yoga techniques, and particularly by the great, ancient science of *Kriya Yoga*. The Bhagavad Gita emphasizes repeatedly the importance of yoga, and hints more than once at this highest of all yoga sciences. Indeed, the scientific aspect of enlightenment underlies every teaching in the Gita. We have already hinted at that aspect.

When an unmagnetized bar of metal is placed next to a bar magnet, it gradually develops a magnetism of

its own as its molecules realign themselves, similarly, in a north-south direction. Such is the real power of the Satguru, or savior, an essential aid to which my Guru referred constantly. He completely endorsed the Indian tradition that one must have a guru to find God. The part played by the guru is not to make his disciples over in his own image, but, by sharing his magnetism with them, to uplift their consciousness. That influence helps to realign the “molecules” of energy in their own bodies, and most particularly in the spine, toward the “north” of the spine at the spiritual eye and in the top of the head (the *sahasrara*).

Apart from the guru’s help, the other thing needed for Self-realization is, as I have said, cooperation with him in the help he gives. This above all is what is intended by working spiritually on oneself. Self-transformation can be accomplished not so much by laboring painstakingly to purify and spiritualize every flaw, but above all by directing all one’s energy toward the spiritual eye. That upward flow of energy is like a river, in this case flowing upward (not downward) to the “mouth” of the spiritual eye, where the soul merges at last into the sea of infinity.

None of this is to belittle the need for making painstaking efforts to transform oneself. Indeed, the Bhagavad Gita begins by recognizing the state of constant warfare in all human beings between vice and virtue.

When one considers, however, the vast undertaking one faces in overcoming even one deep-seated flaw, the task seems endless. Think how long it takes for an alcoholic to overcome even that single trait. Once

he conquers that one weakness, it is an occasion for celebration. The number of faults every man needs to conquer seems almost overwhelmingly vast.

Think of that bar of iron. It contains, probably, billions of molecules. They cancel one another out by the fact of being turned every which way. Now then, supposing one could labor minutely on each molecule: Think how long it would take to turn them all in a north-south direction. By the time one had reached only a short distance in the process, and was ready to start on (so to speak) the next level, it is quite within the bounds of possibility that the first molecules would be already turning randomly again. There would not yet be the magnetism to keep them pointed in the right direction.