

The background of the cover is a detailed, monochromatic illustration of a Hindu temple. At the top center, a deity is seated on a chariot, which is being pulled by a bull. The temple below features intricate carvings, multiple tiers of arches, and a prominent central entrance. The entire scene is rendered in a dark, textured style.

Nightingale  
Conant

The Essence of the  
**BHAGAVAD-GITA**

*Every Person's Guide to  
the All-Time Spiritual Classic*  
**REFERENCE GUIDE**

**STEVEN HARTMAN**

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**BHAGAVAD-GITA**  
Every Person's Guide to the All-Time Spiritual Classic



## **Guidebook**

**Created by Mitch Siskind**

# The Essence of the Bhagavad-Gita

Welcome to the guidebook for The Essence of the Bhagavad-Gita. The purpose of this book is not to reprise or to summarize the contents of the program's audio portion, but rather to look at some of the same ideas from a different perspective. In addition, the guidebook presents a number of quotes from the Bhagavad-Gita itself. These are not always easy to understand in the sense of everyday conversation, but for thousands of years they have proved fascinating and illuminating to people from many cultures. The more you consider the words of the Bhagavad-Gita, the more you will learn from them. Along with the quoted passages, the guidebook also includes questions designed to stimulate thought and insight.

There is no "right way" to study the Bhagavad-Gita, nor are there right or wrong interpretations to its words. On a given day or in a given year, the meaning of a passage may seem very different from how it appeared at another time. Like life itself, the true meaning of the Bhagavad-Gita is not so much in arriving at the correct answer as it is in making the most of the journey of discovery.

In the audio program, Steven Hartman quoted from the Steven Mitchell Harmony Books translation of the Bhagavad-Gita. The quotes used in this guidebook are from the Penguin Books translation. At the end of this guidebook we have provided a list of some of the translations of the Bhagavad-Gita so that you may find one that resonates with you. You are encouraged to study the Bhagavad-Gita, for within its simple story are weaved great wisdoms that have profoundly transformed the lives of many and may do the same for you.

Thank you for joining us in The Essence of the Bhagavad-Gita. We hope this guidebook will add to your enjoyment of the program and of this great work that is truly one of the humanity's most profound treasures.



## The Ancient Wisdom of the Bhagavad-Gita

The Bhagavad-Gita (Song of the God) is one of the great treasures of world literature, and one of mankind's most profound and influential spiritual books. It is written in the ancient language called Sanskrit — a language that is no longer spoken anywhere in the world, although it is the foundation of many modern tongues. The Bhagavad-Gita forms part of the great Sanskrit epic known as the Mahabharata, which is one of the oldest sacred scriptures on this planet.

First and foremost, the Bhagavad-Gita is a book that teaches us *how* to live in the world. It also teaches us *why* we're here and *what* comes next. This is what millions of people, over thousands of years, have learned from the Bhagavad-Gita. The purpose of this guidebook is to help you learn this also.

Although we may think of the Bhagavad-Gita as an exotic and esoteric text that stands remote from our everyday experience, this is not at all what the Bhagavad-Gita really is, nor is this how it's seen in other parts of the world. In India millions of people read the Bhagavad-Gita with the same reverence that many Americans read the Bible. The Bhagavad-Gita, therefore, is seen as both a spiritual guide for the soul and a practical manual for navigating the paths of everyday life.

In a similar way, the setting, the characters, and the action of the Bhagavad-Gita are metaphors for our lives on both the material and spiritual levels. It represents what we need to meet the requirements of our physical selves, as well as the needs of our souls — and it provides the information and tools for achieving self-realization and happiness in our life.

The Bhagavad-Gita takes the form of a dialogue between the warrior Arjuna and Krishna, a divine being who has disguised himself as Arjuna's chariot driver. This dialogue occurs on a battlefield during the evening before a great battle. The causes of the war and the rightness or wrongness of the two sides are very complex, and indeed this complexity is part of the teaching. So often in life, justice and its opposite are mixed beyond any easy recognition, and assigning blame to one side will not diminish the painfulness of a difficult situation.

However, there is one very important fact about the battle that is about to begin. It will take place between people who are blood relations. The battle will be fought between members of the same extended family, and this is deeply troubling for Arjuna.

"Arjuna saw them standing there, fathers, grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, father-in-laws, and friends. Kinsmen on both sides, each side arrayed against the other. In despair, overwhelmed with pity, he said, "As I see my own kinsmen gathered here eager to fight, my legs weaken, my mouth dries, my body trembles, my hair stands on end, my skin burns, the bow drops from my hand. I'm beside myself. My mind reels. I see evil omens. Krishna, no good can come from killing my own kinsmen in battle. I have no desire for victory or wealth."

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

The problem Arjuna faces is indeed a difficult one — and it is one that all of us face at certain times during our lives, or perhaps even at every moment. Arjuna is called upon to do something he really doesn't want to do ... something he thinks is fundamentally wrong ... something that may bring about his death if he fails, and will cause him great guilt even if he succeeds.

Over the course of the Bhagavad-Gita, Arjuna is counseled by Krishna on how to deal with these challenges which symbolically represent the fundamental challenges of life itself.

The Bhagavad-Gita has been interpreted as a carefully constructed allegory, in which the combatants in the war stand for specific states of mind and levels of consciousness. But even without delving into the Bhagavad-Gita's many levels of meaning, it's clear that Arjuna and Krishna represent two sides of our universal human nature: the questioning, doubting, reluctant, anxious part of ourselves — and the transcendent wisdom that must be revealed if we are to fulfill our obligations and find inner peace as well.

## Questions to think about

At the end of each section of this guidebook, we will present some questions based on passages from the Bhagavad-Gita. These are designed to put you in touch with the text of the Bhagavad-Gita itself and to help you place your study of the book in the context of your own life.

In order to think most clearly about these questions, you may find it useful to write out your responses. But this is by no means necessary. It's enough to just listen to the program, read this guidebook, and give some focused attention to these end-of-chapter questions.

1:1

On the field of Truth, on the battlefield of life, what came to pass, Sanjaya,  
when my sons and their warriors faced those of my brother Pandu?

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

1. These are the opening lines of the Bhagavad-Gita, and they introduce the battlefield setting in which the story takes place. Do you consider warfare to be an appropriate symbol for the experience of human life? What are the assumptions that underlie this symbol? How does it differ from some other alternatives — a journey, for example, or a story, or even a game?

2:5

Shall I kill my own masters who, though greedy of my kingdom, are yet my  
sacred teachers? I would rather eat in this life the food of a beggar than eat royal  
food tasting of their blood.

2:9

When Arjuna the great warrior had thus unburdened his heart, "I will not  
fight, Krishna," he said, and then fell silent.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

2. With these words, Arjuna expresses the horror he feels at the prospect of doing violence to men he still respects, despite the fact that they are now his enemies. Are there any challenges you are reluctant to face in your own life at this moment? Are you faced with any tasks whose completion would impose a burden of guilt upon you? If there are such situations in your life, how are you dealing with them? If there are none in your own life, what advice could you give a person who was faced with these dilemmas?

## 2



# Illusion and Essence

At one time or another, everyone says, “What’s the use? Why should I go on trying to accomplish things in life when the ultimate result is already known? I will die, and as far as I’m concerned, everything I did will die with me.”

This is one of the first issues taken up by the Bhagavad-Gita. Arjuna asks Krishna: “If death is inevitable for everyone, what’s the difference how we live? The result will ultimately be the same.” In reply, Krishna explains his philosophy of engagement with the world.

3:8

Action is greater than inaction: therefore perform your task in life. Even the life of the body could not be if there were no action.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

The foundation of this philosophy is a basic truth: “What’s the use?” is a useless question. As long as we are alive, the choice of engagement with the world is already built into our state of being. We may think that sitting under a palm tree for the rest of our lives represents disengagement, but we would still continue to breathe, to see, to hear, and to eat — we would remain engaged in an almost infinite number of ways.

As Krishna says, “If you would not fight the battle of life because you are afraid, your wish is in vain. Nature will compel you to fight...” As long as we are alive and experience physical sensations, let alone human emotions, we are engaged with the world — and it will benefit us if we learn how to do it correctly, as the Bhagavad-Gita teaches.

Since we cannot opt out of engagement with the world, we should learn how to engage with it from a spiritually enlightened perspective. The Bhagavad-Gita uses a single sentence to describe this perspective:

## Established in being, perform action

To understand what this means, imagine that you were chopping an onion and you cut your finger. Imagine also that the cut was fairly severe. How would you respond? It's possible that you would become quite frightened. You might even become so frightened that you couldn't remember what to do when this kind of accident occurs. You might run water on the cut, but should it be hot or cold? You might pace back and forth in the kitchen, pressing a cloth against your hand to try to stop the bleeding. You might just stand there, frightened and try to decide what to do.

Unfortunately, this is the way many people experience their entire lives. The material dimension of experience is all they have access to, and that dimension can be quite overwhelming if they are not able to see any further. According to the teachings of the Bhagavad-Gita, the secret to living in the physical world is the ability to connect with our true essence, which exists beyond space and time, and well beyond anything that can happen when we're slicing an onion! By learning to recognize our transcendent soul as who we really are, we can live in the world with courage and understanding — rather than simply reacting to our fears and desires from one instant to the next.

How can this teaching be put into action in your everyday life? The next time that you find yourself concerned, worried, or even panicked, make a conscious effort to stop and connect with the part of your inner self that is totally unaffected by whatever is happening. That part of you is always present, and you can always find it by making a focused attempt to do so. What's more, when you do connect with your eternal self, you'll find that new viewpoints, new possibilities, and new options will appear for dealing with any worry or concern in your life.

Throughout the centuries, in cultures all around the world, people have used sacred objects to help connect with the spiritual dimension of reality. When you need a reminder of the dimension that exists beyond the emergencies of the moment, try holding in your hand one of the touchstones we have provided as a focal point for this higher reality. This stone has been endowed with a special energy. As you hold the talisman in your hand, take a deep breath and focus your mind on *who you really are* at the most essential level of being.

In the Vedic tradition from which the Bhagavad-Gita derives, this is a practice of Jnana Yoga, the Yoga of Knowledge. Jnana Yoga does not refer to knowledge in the academic sense, but to understanding of the true foundation of all reality. It's the practice of deciphering the real from the unreal and the essential from the superficial. Once you have learned to do this, you will be *wise* in the deepest sense.

You will recognize the sense in which fear, pain, and even death are illusions — as well as the essence of yourself that is beyond the reach of those illusions, now and forever.

## Questions to think about

6:40-43

Neither in this world nor in the world to come does ever this man pass away:  
for the man who does the good, my son, never treads the path of death.

He dwells for numberless years in the heaven of those who did good; and then  
the man who failed in Yoga is born again...

And he begins his new life with the wisdom of a former life; and he begins to  
strive again, ever onward toward perfection.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

1. Krishna tells us that the essence of ourselves will never die. Instead, our souls must eternally experience and correct the effects of our actions through the spiritual process of karma, until at last the “slate is wiped clean” and we are able to advance to a higher level of being. If you really believed that you were invulnerable to death, but the consequences of your actions would always have to be dealt with, how would your life change — in your career, in your relationships, in the way you view the purpose of your life?

6:34-36

Arjuna: The mind is restless, Krishna, impetuous, self-willed, hard to train: to  
master the mind seems as difficult as to master the mighty winds.

Krishna: The mind is indeed restless, Arjuna: it is indeed hard to train. But by  
constant practice and by freedom from passions the mind in truth can  
be trained.

When the mind is not in harmony, this divine communion is hard to  
attain; but the man whose mind is in harmony attains it, if he knows  
and if he strives.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

2. Who is the least frightened, most serene person you know? When has that quality of serenity most clearly expressed itself? What can you learn from that person about bringing peace into your life? What actions can you emulate? What point of view can you seek to make your own?

2:52

When your mind leaves behind its dark forest of delusion, you shall go beyond  
the scriptures of times past and still to come.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

3. Here Krishna is speaking of the passage we must make from the bondage of fear to the freedom of clear knowledge and understanding. Think back to some of the things that frightened you when you were a child. Do any of them still seem frightening? What has changed — the things you feared, or you yourself? Now think of things that concerned you two years ago. Are you still worried about those things? If not, what does this tell you? What are you frightened of or worried about right now? Two years from today, how important do you think those worries will seem?

# 3



## How Should We Live Our Lives?

We've already referred to the fact that the Bhagavad-Gita is at once deeply spiritual and thoroughly grounded in the practical issues of life in the real world.

The Bhagavad-Gita absolutely recognizes the importance of taking part in the activities of daily life. Indeed, attempting to do otherwise is pure foolishness. At the same time, the Bhagavad-Gita also acknowledges the danger of seeing only the physical dimension of reality and of becoming exclusively focused on the material rewards of any undertaking.

To resolve these two points of view — the spiritual and the material — the Bhagavad-Gita offers a startling solution. It is a solution that may at first strike us as exceedingly difficult. But once the Bhagavad-Gita's teaching is understood, it's clear that this is the surest path to joy and fulfillment. It is nothing less than the basic formula for how we should live our lives.

It is the paradox of action and detachment.

It is performing action,  
while remaining detached from the fruits of action.

It is taking action in the world,  
and turning the results over to God.

As the Bhagavad-Gita expresses it:

Act without any thought of results,  
keeping yourself open  
to success or failure.

The wise man lets go of all results,  
whether good or bad, and is focused on action alone.

What does this mean in our daily lives? Is the Bhagavad-Gita saying that we shouldn't accept a paycheck after a hard week at the office? That we should work hard cooking a dinner but not enjoy eating it? That we should compete in a baseball game or a tennis tournament but not keep score?

Actually, the real meaning of combining action with detachment is something very different. The Bhagavad-Gita is not urging us to adopt an ascetic lifestyle. Detachment refers to our inner awareness, not our physical behavior. The Bhagavad-Gita, therefore, is not urging us to cultivate an inner awareness of our true situation in the world. It is simply telling us to see things the way they really are.

At our essence, we do not exist on the material realm. Sooner or later we will leave the dimension we now inhabit and return to the level of spirit that is our true being. Since this is the case, it would be foolish of us to attach ourselves to the things of this world. This does not mean we should not participate in the rewards and results of our endeavors, but we should do so with awareness that our true reality lies elsewhere.

This is the basic interpretation of the Bhagavad-Gita's teaching. There is also another interpretation, and perhaps a still deeper one. According to this viewpoint, the Bhagavad-Gita is telling us not only to remain detached from the results of our actions, but to cultivate detachment *from the very idea that actions can even have results*. By living in the present moment, by doing whatever we undertake with all our physical and spiritual energy, we can automatically break free from the illusion of investing in rewards and outcomes.

The Bhagavad-Gita teaches us to see all our actions as complete in and of themselves. By doing so, we not only relinquish the fruits of our actions — we relinquish even the concept that actions and results have a separate existence. We learn to live completely within what we are doing right now. In this way, we free ourselves from illusion, and we gain the peace that comes with truth and living in the present.

When we are in touch with our eternal self and when we view our lives from the perspective of eternity, we do not forfeit the authentic joys of living in the world. We do not have to enter a monastery, either literally or figuratively. We simply make ourselves open to everything that life has to offer us, and we are able to transcend the labels of "this is good" or "this is bad" that we usually attach to events.

The Bhagavad-Gita teaches us that a truly wise person is someone who has abandoned all ego-driven desires — including even the desire for self-perfection or "bliss." A wise person is unperturbed by sorrow and happiness, is free from passion, anger, and greed. "He withdraws all his senses from their objects like a tortoise withdrawing into a shell." Living in accordance with the Bhagavad-Gita's teachings doesn't mean abstaining from action. It means taking action, but detaching from ego-based needs for reward or punishment, praise, or blame.

The co-existence of action and detachment make up the essential paradox of life. Resolving that paradox at every moment is life's true purpose. Being able to achieve that purpose is true wisdom.

## Questions to think about

4:35-38

When wisdom is yours, Arjuna, never more shall you be in confusion; for you will see all things in your heart, and you will see your heart in me.

And even if you were the greatest of sinners, with the help of the ship of wisdom you shall cross the sea of evil...

Because there is nothing like wisdom that can make us pure on this earth. The man who lives in self-harmony finds this truth in his soul.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

1. When Krishna speaks of “seeing all things in your heart,” he is referring to the capacity to recognize in ourselves even the negative characteristics that we would prefer to ascribe to others. When we gain this power, we are able to forgive other people and to forgive ourselves as well. Right now, think of someone for whom you feel anger or dislike. What is it about them that causes you to feel this way? Think also of the extent to which that very same tendency is present in yourself. By acknowledging that tendency and forgiving yourself for it, you can strip it of its power. Because it can no longer arouse anger toward yourself, it will no longer turn you against other people in your life.

9:26-28

He who offers to me only a leaf, or a flower, or a fruit, or even a little water, this I accept from that yearning soul, because with a pure heart it was offered with love.

Whatever you do, or eat, or give, or offer in adoration, let it be an offering to me; and whatever you suffer, suffer it for me.

In this way you shall be free from the bonds of karma that yield fruits that are evil and good; and with your soul unified in renunciation you shall be free and come to me.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

2. Here Krishna clarifies the idea that renunciation and detachment refer to the ego-based values we place on things and events, not to the things or events themselves. Is there anything in your life right now for which you feel you deserve either special praise or blame? If so, the Bhagavad-Gita counsels you to renounce those feelings — to give all your self-based needs and fears to God. Do you feel you can do this? What sensations do you experience when you think about doing so? What holds you back from letting go of credit or blame?

6:5-6

Arise therefore! And with the help of your spirit lift up your soul: allow not your soul to fall. For your soul can be your friend, and your soul can be your enemy.

The soul of man is his friend when by the Spirit he has conquered his soul; but when a man is not lord of his soul then he becomes his own enemy.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

3. Krishna explicitly states that the “battlefield” of the Bhagavad-Gita is in fact an inner battlefield, in which our positive and negative influences struggle for mastery over our own souls. What is your response to the idea that we can be both friends and enemies to ourselves? In what sense do you feel you are your own friend? Are there any areas of your life in which you suspect that you may be sabotaging yourself or working against your own best interests? What specific steps can you take in order to stop being an enemy to yourself?

# 4



## How Can We Understand the Human Heart?

The Bhagavad-Gita teaches that right action and wisdom are complementary, and it is not possible to realize one without the other. This is because it is a sin to neglect our obligations to take action in the world, and a sinful person cannot be wise.

The Bhagavad-Gita refers to two elements of human nature — a higher one and a lower one — and our experience of life is determined by which side we allow to rule. We can also understand other people by recognizing which side has power in their lives.

The lower element is filled with intentions dictated by physical and emotional desire. Even when the desires are satisfied, they give rise to anger and jealousy. Why? Because there is no lasting satisfaction on the material level. It's impossible — because material satisfaction is not what we really crave. So disappointment and disillusion will always set in.

The higher level is our divine nature, which expresses itself through qualities like selflessness, generosity, and willingness to help others. When the lower level is conquered by the higher, the self becomes a person's friend. "The mind becomes a friend to the one who has control over it and becomes an enemy for the one who is controlled by the mind."

Bringing this about is a lifelong process. Commentators on the Bhagavad-Gita have used the following analogy: "A young plant requires the protection of a fence, or goats and cows will eat it up. But when the same plant grows into a large tree, the cows and goats will come to rest in its shade." In other words, when you are consciously aware of your divinity, you do not need to construct fences in your life. You transform from being fearful to becoming an ally with all of God's creatures.

### Questions to think about

7:16-18

There are four kinds of people who are good and who love me, Arjuna: the person of sorrows, the seeker of knowledge, the seeker of something he treasures, and the person of vision.

The greatest of these is the person of vision ... for I love the person of vision,  
and that person loves me.

These four kinds of people are good; but the person of vision and I are one.

That person's whole soul is in me, and I am that person's Supreme Path.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

1. Here Krishna refers to four categories of individuals. He is reminding us that whenever we come to him, for whatever reason, he is pleased. However, when we seek him simply to express our love, that is the most powerful means of communicating with him. He encourages us to enter into dialogue with him often. When did you last communicate with God? Make an effort to communicate with him more often. Perhaps focus on dialoguing at least three times a day. Then make it a practice to send him appreciation and gratitude for the opportunities that you have been given in your life.

8:7

Think of me therefore at all time; remember me and fight.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

2. This may seem like a strange thing for a god to say in a spiritual book. But by this time it should be clear that Krishna is not speaking of fighting in the ordinary sense. He is asking us to live life fully. In your own life, what challenges, questions, or inner battles are you engaged in?

# 5



## How Can We Succeed in the World?

Although it is a profoundly spiritual work, the Bhagavad-Gita devotes considerable attention to practical matters, including the kinds of work people do and how different kinds of work should be understood.

Krishna tells Arjuna that there are four categories of work or occupation.

1. **Brahmans** — scholars, who are best suited to learn and teach. Their qualities are serenity, self-restraint, insight, and spirituality.
2. **Kshatriyas** — leaders, who are physically and mentally strong. Their qualities are firmness, cunning, generosity, and rulership.
3. **Vaishyas** — traders and business people, who are responsible for fulfilling the material needs of society. Their qualities are intelligence, discipline, practicality, and innovation.
4. **Sudras** — workers, who carry out all the necessary tasks of life. Their essential quality is their readiness to serve.

Traditionally, it was understood that people's past lives determined which category they are in during their present incarnation. If a person behaved well as a Sudra, he could move up to be a Vaishya in his next life. He could also move downward if he behaved poorly.

Today it may be more useful to see how each of us at different points in our career — or even every day — can be called upon to play all of the roles. The key idea is the virtue of doing our best at whatever task we are doing at a given moment. Sometimes a leader needs to be a worker for a while, and a good leader is able to do this. On the other hand, sometimes we need to accept more responsibility than we're used to. We must become leaders, and we need to be prepared for this.

In any case, the Bhagavad-Gita teaches that all forms of life and work are equally worthy of respect, no matter how they are regarded by society. Thus, a good street sweeper is as admirable as a good chief executive. "A wise man looks at the rich or the poor, learned or uneducated, saint or sinner, even a cow, an elephant, or a dog with equal respect."

The Bhagavad-Gita describes a negative category of people who are preoccupied with getting maximum reward from minimum effort. They are arrogant, cunning, and complaining. Work for them

is a means to a self-serving end. People of wisdom work for the sake of the act itself: to fulfill their responsibilities and to “give the glory to God.” For them, work is a kind of worship.

A key idea in the Bhagavad-Gita is the need to see all our work as an offering to God, not as a means to gain wealth and power. This does not mean we have to live as ascetics. Again, it refers to the inner attitude of detachment that we must bring to all our endeavors, including our careers. It means we must give the credit for our achievements to a power higher than ourselves. As long as we do this with complete conviction, we can enjoy material success without being corrupted by it.

## Questions to think about

4:16-18

What is work? What is beyond work? ... I will teach the truth of pure work, and this truth will make you free.

Know therefore what is work, and also know what is wrong work. And know also of a work that is silence: the path of work is mysterious.

The person who in work finds silence, and who sees that silence in work, this person in truth sees the Light and in all his work finds peace.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

1. In the context of this passage, what do you think Krishna means by “wrong work”? What does he mean by “a work that is silence”? What does it mean to find silence in work? What needs to be made silent in order for us to find peace?

5:12

The person of harmony surrenders the reward of his work and thus attains final peace: the person of disharmony, urged by desire, is attached to the reward and remains in bondage.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

2. Notice how Krishna specifies the true reward of work as peace, rather than material gain or worldly success. In your own work, do you ever think of your reward in terms of peace? How can you understand this passage in a way that seems relevant to your own experience?

5:23

A person on this earth who ... can endure the storms of desire and wrath, that person has joy.

They have inner joy, inner gladness, they have found the inner light...

Their sins are no more, their doubts are gone, their souls are in harmony, their joy is in the good of all.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

3. Once gain, our success on earth is defined in spiritual rather than material terms. Our reward is inner joy, not external possessions or riches. What's more, the greatest reward is not just in joy for ourselves, but "in the good of all." Do you make the happiness of others an important component of your own success? What practical steps can you take toward sharing your success with those around you?



## How Will Our Lives Be Judged?

When the great cathedrals were built in Europe during the Middle Ages, they included depictions of hell that were much more vivid and convincing than the representations of heaven. There seems to be something in human consciousness that needs or yearns for judgment, and perhaps even punishment. But the Bhagavad-Gita does not subscribe to this need.

Instead, the Bhagavad-Gita teaches that God is removed from the judgment of human affairs: “God does not connect actions and their effects.”

The Bhagavad-Gita does refer to “the threefold gate of hell,” but this punishment is inflicted by ourselves, not by God. “Lust, anger, and greed — these three man should abandon. By turning away from these three entrances to the realm of darkness, man behaves according to his own highest good, and therefore reaches the divine.”

The Bhagavad-Gita teaches that there is no permanent state of sin that requires permanent or eternal punishment. On the contrary, all sin is erased as soon as higher consciousness is achieved. To explain this, Krishna says that God accepts a leaf, flower, or even a cup of water as an offering when it is offered with love. How much more joyfully, therefore, does he accept the soul who at last turns to him with sincere intention. When all our actions are offered to God in this way, we become freed from sin once and for all.

In common with many other spiritual traditions, the Bhagavad-Gita teaches that the last moments of our life express the sum total of our spiritual work and achievement. “If a person knows God and remembers God at the time he leaves his body, there is no doubt that he will reach God and find God after his death.”

In order to have this consciousness in our final moments, the Bhagavad-Gita urges us to remember God at all times during our lives. Krishna tells Arjuna, “Perform all your worldly actions remembering me. Let your mind feel and think and be permeated by me. Then there is no doubt that thinking of me at the last moment you will find me, reach me.”

If we do not achieve this consciousness that allows us to reach God, what happens? The Bhagavad-Gita teaches that we are not punished or tormented, but that we must return to the world in another incarnation — and for another try at transcending our ego attachments. This teaching will be the topic of the guidebook’s final section.

## Questions to think about

8:5

Whoever at the end of their lives leave their bodies thinking of me, they in truth come to my being...

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

1. Why does the Bhagavad-Gita give such emphasis to our final thoughts as we are about to leave this world? Does this mean that a person who has lived a disreputable life can enter the presence of God based on what is in his heart only at the last moment? How do you feel about this teaching?

8:26

There are two paths that are forever: the path of light and the path of darkness.  
The one leads to the land of never-returning; the other leads to sorrow.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

2. Here Krishna refers to heaven as “the land of never-returning.” As we have seen, it is the destiny of our souls to be reincarnated again and again until we “get it right.” What do you imagine takes place in “the land of never returning”? Can you conceive of an existence that you would prefer to anything that’s possible on earth? What would it include?

8:28

There is a reward that comes from sacrifice, from an austere life or from holy gifts. But a far greater reward is attained by those who know the truth of light and darkness: they attain their Everlasting Home.

*(The Bhagavad-Gita, Penguin translation)*

3. What do you imagine is meant by “the truth of light and darkness”? This is a significant question, since Krishna clearly says that answering it is the key to gaining entrance to paradise. But perhaps answering it is not so much finding the correct phase as it is living in a spiritually enlightened way. What can you do in your life to show that you know the difference between light and darkness? How can you make this difference a principle of how you will live in years to come, as well as how you live right now?

# 7



## What Comes Next?

We have learned that the purpose of life is the attainment of wisdom. But the purpose of wisdom is to move beyond the cycle of life and death. Christianity teaches that it is Christ's sacrifice of his own life that bestows this gift on mankind. But the Bhagavad-Gita says that we ourselves are in control of the gift. It will absolutely and inevitably be given — but when it will be given is up to us.

Regarding this, the Bhagavad-Gita understands everything in the material world as stages in the progress toward getting off the wheel of reincarnation. Wherever there is pain and suffering, the Bhagavad-Gita teaches us that they are the result of incomplete consciousness. And the power to complete that consciousness is in our hands: “The wise man does not grieve over his fate and his difficult future incarnations. Rather, he concentrates his powers on destroying his attachments to the material dimension, and identifying himself with the omniscient God.”

In short, what happens next is an expression of what happens now. As Krishna tells Arjuna: “The beginning of all creatures is veiled, and the end is imperceptible. Only the middle is manifested.” We must concentrate our efforts on making the most of our time in the world by using the teachings and tools that the Bhagavad-Gita provides. Only in this way can we fulfill our destiny of union with the divine.

In closing, remember the Bhagavad-Gita's central paradox: we must be both engaged and detached at the same time. This is a difficult experience to explain, but everyone has at least glimpsed it at one time or another, if only for a moment. Let us close this guidebook — and start along the spiritual path of the Bhagavad-Gita — by trying to clearly recall some of those moments in your lifetime, and by making a commitment to creating many more of them in the days and years to come.

**Note:** Translations are from Penguin Books edition. Translator: Juan Mascaro. Copyright by Juan Mascaro, 1962. All rights reserved.

# Translations of the Gita

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