

My Favourites from Gita

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1 *Gita is Difficult!*

There are several difficulties in writing anything about Gita! To begin with there is a justifiable feeling among the readers that we need another article on Gita as much as we need a New Revised Table of Integers — and I really can't blame them, given the number of articles that exist on the subject.

Second, people think they *do* know something about Gita and they have some emotional feelings and opinions about it. Many feel it is sacred. So while one can get away being unorthodox about Patanjali or the Upanishads — just because people don't know or care too much about these — you better be careful about what you say about Gita. I am not very good at being careful!.

Third, and probably most important, *Gita is indeed difficult to understand* in spite of its apparent simplicity and popularity. *It is a lot more difficult than the Upanishads, Patanjali or Zen.* Let me explain why: Upanishads and Zen — as well as Patanjali — 'give it to you straight' and are quite logical and non-contextual. Compared to these, Gita is more complex and the interplay of ideas can only be grasped with some amount of appreciation for the context. It has quite a bit of overlap with Upanishadic ideas but it also relies on the concept of a (Personal) God — someone you pray to and someone who takes care of you etc. This mixture creates a problem for the modern mind.

As you might have noticed, yoga, meditation, Zen etc. are very fashionable ventures today — thanks to the new-found commercial value of Eastern Philosophy. Everyone I know is either teaching or learning pranayama today, often with such intensity that I wonder how they ever breathed before; only recently a teenager cooed to me that she is "into" Zen meditation because it is "sooooo coool". All this is useful in being pretentious and TV anchors like to talk about these topics. But try the simple concept of a Personal God on any of them and they will run a mile. Going to a place of worship, praying, showing devotion to a God etc. are not "sooooo coool"; it went away with grandma.

That would have been fine if you can forget your temples and just stick with your brand of transcendental meditation or some such fashionable thing. The trouble is it won't work with Gita which mixes up these two concepts — yoga and devotion — chapter by chapter and sometimes in the same verse! Krishna will tell you about mindfulness and yoga and devote an entire chapter to meditation; and in the same breath, he will ask you (rather, Arjuna) to be

devoted to him, surrender to him and be awestruck by his Cosmic Form. That is a bit hard to reconcile with fashionable ideas of Yoga for Detoxing, Meditation for Better Skin and Gita for Effective Corporate Governance. (How about a statue of Krishna in a Board Room and prayer before discussing M&A ?). One squirms a bit.

This aspect of Gita is closely related to the fact that Krishna is totally spontaneous and multidimensional. His philosophy is not straight-jacketed to a particular formalism of thought or logic and, in fact, Gita has very little of formal description of a philosophical structure. This is unlike Upanishads or Yoga-Sutra which — in order to be concise, clear and logical — need to follow a sharp, mono-dimensional, track. Shankara will see Advaita in Gita while Ramanuja will see Dvaita and you can see something else. Krishna has such fullness that Gita can be interpreted in many — mutually contradictory but simultaneously correct — ways; in this spirit, it is very close to Zen. If you are looking for ironclad logic go to Upanishads or Yoga Sutra; Gita is concerned with truth, not logic.

So to discuss Gita *correctly*, one needs to think through the concepts a lot more than you have to while discussing other — more logical and structured — texts like Upanishads or Patanjali. Even then, it is easy to get caught in some irrelevant detail or a passing comment of Krishna and miss the woods for the trees. It is therefore better, now that I have taken the plunge, to make some general comments before discussing the details.

2 *When Gita is of no use to you*

To begin with, let us forget inessential details like who wrote Gita, did Krishna and Arjuna exist, did Mahabharata war take place (if so when ?)..... I want to discuss what Gita says — not how and when it originated; as far as this article goes,¹ Mahabharata could have been typed up last week as pure fiction and emailed to me by a friend.

But the context of Gita *within* Mahabharata — whether it is history or fiction — has some significance. As the first chapter clearly outlines, Gita is Krishna's response to Arjuna's unhappiness arising from indecision and confusion. The first chapter is indeed called 'Arjuna *vishadha* ('unhappiness/sorrow') yoga'. Obviously, in a broader context, when faced with conflicts in one's life making us indecisive or confused, thereby leading to unhappiness, we should be able to use Gita to get around it. Gita is intended as a Guide Book for this purpose.

It therefore presupposes that (1) you *are* unhappy (experiencing '*vishada*') and (2) you don't know how to get around it. These are strong assumptions and if they are not true — most people are either not sufficiently unhappy or they believe they know how to handle it — forget it; Gita is useless for you.

The first point is extremely vital and is often overlooked. Are you really, really, sad because of your own suffering as well as the suffering you see around you? The trouble with our upper middle class, uneducated literates, is that they don't really suffer; also they are not intelligent enough to learn from other people's suffering unlike Prince Siddhartha — who later became Buddha. That

¹If you are *really* curious, the best interpretation of Hindu epics is in *The Permanent History of Bharata Varsha* by Narayana Aiyar; but it is not an easy book to get or read.

guy, a garden variety prince of a kingdom in North India, was really sharp in the simple, brain teaser-solving, chess-playing,, I.Q sense of the word. The story goes that he led a sheltered life in his palace during his early youth without coming in contact with any misery. One day, when he managed to slip out, he saw an old, sickly man and a dead body and he could draw *all the relevant conclusions* from it. We were never sheltered in a palace and have known old age and death (and much worse, just turn on the TV News), but we continue to miss their significance.

Most people are not sufficiently sad or disturbed; they are generally happy with the world and all these philosophy stuff for them are some kind of side business, intellectual pastime to appear cultured on coffee tables; sure, when your child dies or you get a toothache that defies Analgin you brood over the Deep Questions for 15 minutes a day but you will soon get over it ... until the next disaster comes along. If spirituality is an optional extra for you along with coffee in the morning and PGW in the evening in this broadly-all-right world you do not have sufficient *vishada* and your pot-shots at God and religion is a complete waste of time.

Most of such people indulge in their beliefs (and occasional bribes in the form of bargain-deals, pujas, prayers) *only when* they are in trouble and want to get out of it. Krishna, of course, knows this well and says in Gita, almost with tongue-in-cheek, in verse 7.16:

चतुर्विधा भजन्ते मां जनाः सुकृतिनो ऽर्जुन ।
आर्तो जिज्ञासुरर्थार्थी ज्ञानी च भरतर्षभ ॥

“Four kinds of people... worship me, Arjuna — the distressed person, the curious one, the seeker of wealth and the man of knowledge.”² First one is the guy with tooth ache, the second is the academically Curious One (who wants to *know* what happens if he prays, does God really exist etc.), third is all around us and the fourth is the what we will be focusing in this article later on.

The worst of the lot is the The Curious One who likes to have some ‘spiritual experience’ just like he likes to try out a new flavour of ice-cream; he wants to stay at a safe distance and ‘understand’ what scriptures say, what Gita says, what sages say, ‘appreciate’ it, talk about it, and then occasionally ‘practice’ bits and pieces. All this is supposed to coexist with normal egoistic acts, sometimes even justified by quoting Gita — that one should not run away from the life. He has no real *vishada* at all (except when he gets tooth ache), he is fairly stupid and pretentious and this ‘spirituality’ and worship are just added extras to indulge in when he has time (for God!). All of them will even claim that their temple-visits, Veda-chantings, Gita-readings and Aratis give them ‘peace of mind’ and other goodies. (They will get faster results from hard drugs and will remain less pompous and egoistic in the long run compared to most ‘religious’ people.) If you belong to this class of “Oh, I am deeply interested in Hindu Scriptures” type, Gita is of no use to you. Forget it and lead the usual life. Once you have suffered enough or when your IQ increases above a threshold, come back to Gita and this article; I am not here to provide you an intellectual pastime activity.

²One word about the verses and translation. I will make sure my translations convey what Krishna had in mind but I am not going to nit-pick beyond that, unlike Sanskrit scholars!. The idea of giving the original Sanskrit verse is only for the benefit of those who know the language. If you don’t, just ignore the the stuff in funny fonts and no harm will come to you.

Assuming you have had enough, and filled with *vishada*, you still need to qualify on the second count. You must be convinced that you do not know how to tackle it. You may believe that by appropriately changing your external circumstances (getting a more paying/satisfactory job, better spouse, more money, more power, losing 10 pounds,) everything will be fine. Of course, you could still lose your legs in an accident but you may be willing to take a chance on it.

This attitude is perfectly acceptable. *If you think you have the answer to your problems, you don't need Gita.* It is intended for Arjuna with *vishadha* and if you are not really at your wits end, Gita will not make sense to you. This is the beauty of the Hindu scriptures, especially the Upanishads which emphasizes that a permanent solution to your unhappiness will only come from transforming yourself rather than trying to change the environment continuously. The authors of Upanishadic literature even had considered it beneath their dignity to spend time proving this point! Their attitude is remarkable: ‘You think you can achieve happiness by controlling the external circumstances and satisfying your desires?’, they would have said, ‘Go right ahead and try it out! When you are finally convinced that it is a foolish venture, come back to me and I will tell you the Right Way’. Gita (and this article!) is not for the one who thinks he has the answers.

Incidentally, one direct consequence of this is that authors of Gita or Upanishads do not try to save your souls! There is a clear injunction in verse 18-67 that “Gita should not be conveyed to those who do not wish to hear it”. If you do not want to listen to what Krishna has to say, you are totally at liberty to ignore him - no threats, inducements. *He won't bother you.*

Such an attitude goes hand in hand with the acceptance of all other human endeavors towards happiness — including all other religions — because you have the right to believe that some other religion (e.g., Marxist Socialism or Jainism, it doesn't matter what you choose!) will solve your problems of unhappiness. Krishna does not quarrel with you. Instead, verse 7.21-22, states that whatever Gods (Jesus, Allah, Ra,) anyone wants to worship ultimately leads to worship of Krishna!!

यो यो यां यां तनुं भक्तः श्रद्धयार्चितुमिच्छति ।
तस्य तस्याच्छलां श्रद्धां तामेव विदधाम्यहम् ॥
स तथा श्रद्धया युक्तस्तस्या राधनमीहते ।
लभते च ततः कामान्मयैव विहितान्दि तान् ॥

“Whosoever desires to worship whatever deity (using any name, form, and method) with faith, I make their faith steady in that very deity. Endowed with steady faith, they worship that deity and obtain their wishes through that deity. Those wishes are, indeed, granted only by Me.” There is a similar verse chanted in many other religious occasions which makes it more explicit:

आकाशात् पतितं तोयं यथा गच्छति सागरम् सर्वं देव नमस्कारः केशवं प्रतिगच्छति

“Just as the water falling from the sky reaches the oceans, the salutations to any God reaches Kesava.” Such a liberal and tolerant attitude can only arise in a philosophical structure which is supremely self-confident about its own veracity and mature in its attitude. *It knows that, eventually, its tenets have to be accepted and is willing to wait patiently!* More diffident and insecure philosophical ideas

will resort to force or inducements for their sustenance and propagation. I find this an extremely clever and powerful position for a religious system to adopt. You don't have to convert anyone to your religion; they all belong to your religion even though *they* may not know it!

3 *Getting rid of your Vishada*

Assuming you are at the same state as Arjuna was in chapter 1, confused, indecisive and sad, then we can get on with the question of how to eliminate the *vishada* or unhappiness.

Of course, this business of removing the unhappiness is the goal of several (in fact, all ?) human ventures and all scriptures have something to say about it. Upanishads (and Zen masters) tell you the correct approach, simply, logically and most directly. If you feel “I am unhappy” just find out who or what is this “I”. This inquiry will lead directly to a state which is not communicable to others at an intellectual level. But *your* problem of unhappiness — along with *that of happiness*, incidentally — goes away in the process. This transcendence of dualities is swift, direct and simple in the approach of Upanishads. In Gita, this non-dual state is described rather briefly and poetically (and is easy to miss!) in verse 6.30:

यो मां पश्यति सर्वत्र सर्वं च मयि पश्यति ।
तस्याहं न प्रणश्यामि स च मे न प्रणश्यति ॥

“*He who perceives me everywhere and perceives all things in me does not lose sight of me nor do I of him*”. If everything is You, Him, Brahman, Nothing, God, That or This, it does not matter what you call it but you cannot have duality. All problems cease³.

You can do it now, here and then get on with the rest of your life as a celebration or play (*‘lila’*) as Krishna does. Nothing changes outwardly; as a Zen master said, you draw water and chop wood before Enlightenment and you continue to draw water and chop wood afterwards — but the ‘you’ in the two states are different. If you can do this, you don’t need gods, godmen, techniques, scriptures including Gita; in fact, Gita says this (verse 2.46) also explicitly:

यावानर्थं उदपाने सर्वतः संशुतोदके ।
तावान्सर्वेषु वेदेषु ब्राह्मणस्य विजानतः ॥

“*To a Self-realized person, the Vedas are as useful as a well is useful when a flood of water is available everywhere*.” I will interpret the ‘Vedas’ in this verse to include all scriptures.

This process is beyond the familiar domain of intellect and mind and — once carried through — your day-to-day mind becomes a tool to you just like, say, your fingers. In your current state of affairs, you have no control over your thought processes and your mind is running amok — somewhat like your fingers twitching and vibrating on their own. Except that, if that happens you will run to a neurologist but you seem to think the twitching and vibration of the mind

³I have said more about these aspects in another article which can be found here: <http://www.iucan.ernet.in/~paddy/answer/article.htm>. Obviously, you will find some overlap between this article and the current one.

is not a disease; actually it is as much a disease. In the ideal state, your mind does not move except when you order it to move just as your fingers move only when you want them to move.

But, unfortunately, most people again lack the intelligence to follow the direct path of the Upanishads. It does need a conventionally sharp brain, ability to think very logically and a spirit of adventure and courage to go beyond logic. It is no surprise that an average person can only pay lip service to Upanishads, at best. Most of the remaining scriptures are intended for these people and Gita is no exception. It gives false answers to false questions but in a manner which will prepare you to realize that both are false.

It addresses the key issue from a rather simple point of view of how to act in this world. The Zen master ‘draws water and chops wood’ differently from the others and this trick of ‘action without action’ is indeed the central theme of Gita. Roughly speaking this involves remaining internally detached and centered while engaged in this world, which in turn leads to a refreshingly new concept of renunciation (*sanyasa*) while continuously engaged in worldly activities. As mentioned in verse 5.10 and 18.6,

सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा

you only cut the link, identification, attachment (*sangam* is the word used) between you and your actions, rather than renounce the actions themselves: A similar phrase is used in verse 3.9 as well:

मुक्तसङ्गः

The really important question is, of course, *how do you do it?*

Gita has two parallel themes running through it to help you to reach this goal. One, which is popular (the Gita-for-Corporate-Excellence part), is, by and large, all about equanimity, sense of balance, serenity, and all sort of other goodies. The *goal* is stated very clearly and the description of the person who has *already* reached that goal is given in many, many, verses — like verse 5.18, 6.89, 12.17-19, 14.24-25 in addition to the detailed description of *‘shithaprajnya’* (person of steady wisdom, loosely translated) in chapter 2. But all this is academic unless you know how to get there from here! *The practical route to achieve this is somewhat hidden all over the Gita.* The first task of this article is to scoop this out and highlight the procedure for ‘getting there from here’.

The second thread in Gita is one of simple devotion and surrender to the (Personal) God. In this context, *both* the method and the goal are explicitly stated, except that modern mind finds it very difficult to relate to (or even wholeheartedly believe in) this approach compared to understanding the more philosophical approaches. The beauty — and the complexity — of Gita is that it intertwines these two approaches without batting an eyelid — which was logically possible only because the Personal God himself was speaking in Gita! The second task for this article, will be to disentangle and clarify the relationship between the two themes.

4 Do think it over!

My most favorite verse in Gita comes right towards the end - Verse 18:63 - which says:

“Thus has Knowledge declared to you by me; reflect on it fully and act as you like”. The second part of this verse is nice for several reasons:

First of all, Krishna does not thrust Gita down your throat. You are invited to ‘reflect on it fully’ and then form your own opinion. You can accept it all, reject it all, accept part of it and consider the rest as incorrect - Krishna does not care!

This is precisely the basis for any scientific communication. When I read a paper in Astrophysical Journal, I reserve the right to accept its conclusions or reject them in part or full even if the author is a Nobel Laureate. The reason is simple: If the author is not really an expert, he could make mistakes and I better be discriminatory; on the other hand, if the author is really an authority, why, then surely he will be able to present the arguments in such a manner that I will find it convincing and accept it. No whip is needed in either case. Authority/faith needs to be invoked only by the diffident and insecure whose arguments have no logical strength to stand on their own. Only a supremely confident author will give this explicit option to the reader (listener). Krishna seems to be quite confident of what he said — which is the first reason we should take him and Gita very seriously! Anybody asking for unthinking obedience can be safely ignored.

Contrast this with what goes on in the market place of religion. Your Pundits and Gurus who sell the religions for their existence — any religion, of course, not just Hinduism — will not give you this option! “You better listen to me or else” is the usual tone of Gurus and religion-peddlers. The reason, of course, is that *their* existence is threatened if you start ‘reflecting fully’ on what they are telling you – in some cases you might even get violent! No Guru giving lectures on Gita will tell you to ‘reflect on it fully’ and *do what you like* — even though the original author clearly said it! There are, for example, several verses (like Verse 3:14, Verse 4:24-32, Verse 8:23-27, etc.) which are rather too poetic to make immediate sense. To me it doesn’t matter and I will not bend over backwards interpreting them. If a section of a paper in Astrophysical Journal does not make sense, I just ignore it and take the rest which could be useful. Your Gita Pundit — and usually it gets worse if his knowledge of Sanskrit is better — won’t let you ignore anything in Gita: “How dare you doubt the Lord’s word ?” is the reaction. But remember the Lord himself told me to ‘reflect on it fully’ and decide for myself. The reason Gurus have to act more loyal than the King is simple. Their livelihood depends on your accepting certain things on faith. The good Lord Krishna had no such compulsions and could afford to take a liberal stand.

So the first point Gita makes is: “reflect on it fully”, think about it, question it, try alternativesnothing is to be taken on faith. This is, of course, consistent with Gita being treated at par with Upanishads — which are probably the only religious scriptures in the world that encouraged dialogue as a means of arriving at truth.

Incidentally, there is another place in Gita where Krishna gives a direct endorsement of argumentation and logical debate. This is in Verse 10:32,

वादः प्रवदतामहम्

“Among those who debate I manifest as the dialectic (the process of logical inquiry through questions and answers)” As long as you are dealing directly with Krishna and not with his self-appointed agents on earth, you can debate and be logical about Gita — *He* doesn’t mind!.

5 *Future? That is irrelevant!*

My second favourite in Gita is verse 37 of chapter 2,

हतो वा प्राप्स्यसि स्वर्गं जित्वा वा भोक्ष्यसे महीम् ।
तस्मादुत्तिष्ठ कौन्तेय युद्धाय कृतिनिश्चयः

My Favourite 2

“*Either you die and attain the Heaven or you win (the battle) and enjoy the earth; therefore arise, resolved in battle*”. The key point to note here is that life has no assurances; and Krishna is not in this business of telling you “Sub teekh ho jayega, beta (Everything will be fine, my boy)”. He is *not* telling Arjuna, “Come now, you are the best in this business of war; let us get on with it and you *will* win”. Neither is he telling him — at this early stage in Gita, though it gets more interesting when he shows the Cosmic Form later on; we will discuss it in Section 11 — something like, “I am the past, present and future and I know All; let me tell you what is going to happen: you will win.” No, he just says two outcomes are possible and it does not matter which is realized. The idea is to react as best as we can to the situation life has thrown at us. “Shut up and deal with it” is the basic tone of the message!

I can’t again help contrasting it with what goes on in the name of religion all around us. Every sucker wants to know the future: “Will I/my son/daughter get married/wealthy ? Will I live loooooong ? Will some misfortune fall on my neighbour ? What about that ministership ?....” the list of such inessential questions is endless. Inessential because the outcomes of these will make no real difference to you — believe me, if you are in the habit of being anxious about the future, you will always be, irrespective what happens to you. But every Guru and Godman knows how to exploit these suckers for their self-aggrandizement! They can answer all these questions and more — for a price, of course. I know Pundits who can chant scriptures forwards and backwards. You can hire them to chant Vedas or Gita at your home; and after the chanting (including the above verse!), they will “bless” you with all kind of good things. As if it will work and — more importantly — as if either you or him know what *is* good for you!!

Fortunately, Krishna is not in the business of predicting your future; he tells you not to worry about trivialities like what will happen to you in future! So that is the second point Gita makes: “Forget this anxiety about the future; take care of the present and the future will take care of itself — and *accept what comes*”. Very close to Zen, “whichever way the wind blows is fine by me”.

6 *Meditating 24 × 7*

There is another, more important, aspect to the above verse. In fact, it goes right to the root of the message in several chapters in Gita and hence worth spending some time on. What this verse emphasizes indirectly (and is elaborated more

directly in other verses) is the concept of “living in the present” and accepting what comes. This is probably the key *operational* message of Gita.

It is this awareness of the present — what the Zen calls mindfulness — which Gita calls Karma Yoga. The word karma should be just interpreted as action: like drinking coffee, taking a walk, killing people, watching a movie these are all actions (‘karmas’) and you can build a yoga out of them with mindfulness. Different aspects of this message are covered in several verses but are usually quite misunderstood because the Sanskrit word ‘karma’ is over-interpreted as something profound and deep. As I told you before, Gita is a Guide Book for you and it should not be treated with any more awe and wonder than the instruction manual you got with your camera (not the digital one, they can be pretty profound). As far as Gita is concerned, washing dishes and drinking coffee is as much a karma as building hospitals or leading nations — Gita’s instructions on how you should handle the karma is the same whether you are drinking coffee or leading a nation in war.

The interpretation of karma yoga as Zen’s mindfulness makes you understand several verses of Gita properly and in context at one stroke. (We still need to deal with verses which hit us with a God and devotion but we will come to that later.) Recall that the entire Gita is a direct response to Arjuna’s unhappiness (‘*vishadha*’ of the first chapter). Anyone with average intelligence will realize that the only way to be happy or serene in *all* circumstances requires an ability to prevent the brain from producing uncontrolled responses to external stimuli. The trouble, of course, is that the brain is not a simple thing to control.

Just stop reading for five minutes to observe your mind. You will notice that your mind triggers a series of thoughts based on previously stored memories “on its own”. In fact, most of our day-to-day activities are accompanied by unsolicited thoughts in the brain triggered constantly by the environment and memories. When we brush our teeth, take our bath, read our newspaper, say our prayers, write the important draft which the boss wanted, in all these actions we only involve a part of our brain. The rest of it is having a free ride thinking whatever it wants. Most of the time, these are low intensity, mildly diverging thoughts which does not cause any harm; so we indulgently tolerate this poisonous habit of distraction. But every once in a while, the uncontrolled part of the brain, viz. the mind, gets stuck at a powerful thought current and repeatedly shoots it forth disturbing the other orderly part completely. And we feel miserable.

Where does the mind find so much of material to produce such a constant background noise of random thoughts ? It gets it from the vast storehouse of impressions and memories locked up in our brain. Usually, every action we perform and every thought which we think leaves a trace in our brain. (The technical Sanskrit word is *vasana*). These traces are constantly collected, co-ordinated and stored in the memory. As the bulk of information to be stored increases, layers of them are pushed down to a subconscious terrain over which we normally have no conscious access. But I am sure you have dreamt in your sleep about people and places of which you have no conscious recollection. In other words, the part of the brain you are usually unaware of, retains access to those pieces of information stored in the subconscious, even though the part of the brain you are aware of couldn’t use it. It is this subconscious storehouse of Impressions which propels the mind. There is no such thing as ‘peaceful mind’; if you have a mind, you can’t be peaceful!

As I said before, the direct and logical approach to solving the problem of mind, advocated by Upanishads (and Ramana Maharishi in recent times), is to gently center on the concept of 'I-thought' all the time. Eventually, this will kill the mind (as you now know it) and will lead directly to a realization/experience which is not verbalisable at an intellectual level. This non-dual experience is called by different names in different texts but your problems of unhappiness along with those of happiness ends with it. But for those who lack the courage for this adventure, we need all the rest of the scriptures, techniques etc. etc.

Popular among them, which appeal to the sophisticated modern mind, are the cheaper techniques of meditation you can buy from local Gurus which attempt to solve this problem along a different line. One is told to provide something for the conscious mind to chew on (e.g., breath, mantras) and keep the mind at it. Once certain degree of concentration is achieved one tries to sink into a state of quietness by removing the original material given to chew on. For example, one may be given a mantra to chant on; as the chanting goes on, at some stage one could halt it abruptly. The time gap between the last chant and the moment when the first stray thought enters again will be a state of quietness. If this time gap can be increased with practice, one eventually can eliminate the chatter. Alternatively, one can try to chant the mantra more and more slowly with larger and larger gaps making sure that no stray thought enters in between. These gaps — as they become longer — will help to reduce chatter. Some tantric and Buddhist systems use the breath as a clutch to concentrate on. Many people find these easier to practice than the more direct approach described in the previous paragraph of catching the 'I'.

But Krishna — unlike the modern Gurus — knows that this practice, *by itself*, is not enough; such a meditation technique is useless unless accompanied by a life-style change — to use a popular phrase! There is a major problem with the idea of '20-minute meditation as a panacea for all troubles'. Suppose you do succeed in controlling your mind for twenty minutes each day; what happens for the rest of the day? The chances are that the mind will be running amok with as much vigour as before. No; it is not at all like doing 30 minutes a day aerobics to keep body fit. The 20 minute meditation with a mantra will not lead to a 'mood' that lasts all day or 'recharge' your batteries or any such thing. (Don't pay for such stuff.) Whatever you achieve in twenty minutes *will be undone* in the next fifteen hours and you will be back to square one! The situation is similar to a diabetic who keeps off sugar for half an hour each day but eats whatever he likes for the rest of the time. This is the trouble with several meditation programmes currently available in the market.

In the technical terminology of yoga sutra, you need to stop creating fresh vasanas and work out the existing ones ('*vasana-shaya*') to kill the mind ('*manonasa*'). The karma yoga of Gita — which is the same as 'mindfulness' in Zen — attacks and solves this problem. Karma Yoga asks you to put your mind entirely on the task in hand — be it drinking coffee, killing people, writing a research paper We are now talking about elementary awareness: do everything in your life being totally conscious of what you are doing. Zen monks have been taught traditionally to make tea or wash dishes in a very conscious manner. In fact, there is a Zen story in which the master asks the disciple "why are you washing the dishes?". When the disciple says "to make them clean" the master hits him on the head and says "you wash the dishes to wash the dishes - not to make them clean". This tells you how to run the life. At this level,

you actually are identifying with one thought at a time; so you are not quite there but keeping one thought at a time is great progress compared to having a million random thoughts, which is the normal state of affairs.

This idea of doing every little action — which includes simple things like washing your face or making your bed — in the perfect possible manner with full attention concentrated on it is true Karma Yoga. It transforms the mundane Karmas — activities — of your life into a yoga. Krishna says this explicitly in two places: Verse 2:48 says

योगस्थः कुरु कर्मणि

“do your karmas as yoga”; Verse 2:50 says

योगः कर्मसु कौशलम्

“yoga is dexterity in action”. There is no fundamental difference between Karma Yoga of Gita and the mindfulness of Zen.

Lots of other stuff in the early chapters really makes sense (only) when you realize that Karma yoga involves paying total attention to the present moment. In fact, without such mindfulness most of chapter 2 is empty theory. For example, take the famous verse, Verse 2:47

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि

with the first line saying “you only have the control over your actions; not their results”. This line is often interpreted as “you should not be concerned with the fruits of your action but only with the action”. To be accurate, the line in question does not really say explicitly what you should or should not; it merely says that your control (‘*adhikar*’ is the word) is limited to your action. The fruits of the action often depend on lots of extraneous factors in addition to your contribution and what you get is not in your control. Viewed in this context, it is a simple truth (and you don’t need a Krishna to tell you that). But, of course, when taken along with several other verses, it is clear that Krishna is *indeed* telling you not to fret over the fruits of action while acting. This is explicitly emphasized in several other verses, like Verse 2:38

सुखदुःखे समे कृत्वा लाभालाभौ जयाजयौ ।
ततो युद्धाय युज्यस्व नैवं पापमवाप्स्यसि

“Regarding pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat as equal, involve yourself in battle; you will not then incur any sin” (as well as in Verse 4:20-24 etc. which I won’t bother to quote). The most beautiful phrase is in Verse 3:30:

युध्यस्व विगतज्वरः

“fight without fever(ish agitations)” — if even waging war has to be done with equanimity, it goes without saying that Krishna doesn’t want you to fret over lesser issues! Large number of other verses (like e.g. 18.10: 14.24-25, 5.18, 6.8-9) describe at length the nature of a person of such equanimity (*Sthithaprag-nya*). For example, the last three words of second line in verse 2.48,

declares equanimity or sense of balance as same as yoga. You are essentially told to be uncaring about what happens and yet act diligently and continuously in this world!

Can you actually be motivated to do *anything* without desiring, expecting, thinking about its fruits? Under normal circumstances this is impossible. The only reason the idea is practical is because of mindfulness described earlier! “Yoga is dexterity in action” goes hand in hand with “fight without fever(ish agitations)”. If you are concentrating on each action — and only on the action — while it is being performed, it is clear that you will have no chance for worrying and brooding over the results of these actions! In other words, it will be *impossible* for you to worry about the fruits of your actions. You live your life to the full, enjoying each moment of your existence and doing everything which you have to do in the best possible manner.

7 *You have a right to remain silent!*

Another facet of mindful action is related to the naive notion of morality and ethics. In the verses up to Verse 2:35, Krishna talks about Atman being indestructible and seems to be telling Arjuna that, “Go ahead and kill these guys. It is fine because you can’t kill the Atman and only the body which is anyway perishable etc etc.” Try telling that to judge after committing a murder: “Your Honor, there is this Atman which is never born and never dies; so you see” Fat chance you have for beating the noose!

The only reason it makes sense in this context is because, when you are acting mindfully, you are making no choices borne of emotional attachment. The results of such actions leave no traces (fresh vasanas) in your subconscious. In such choiceless awareness there is no question of good or bad, sacred or sinful actions. For example, verse 5.7 says:

योगयुक्तो विशुद्धात्मा विजितात्मा जितेन्द्रियः ।
सर्वभूतात्मभूतात्मा कुर्वन्नपि न लिप्यते ॥

He whose mind is pure, whose mind and senses are under control, and who sees one and the same Eternal Being (Brahma) in all beings, is not bound by Karma though engaged in work.

The key trick is to cut one’s emotional binding to the action rather than the action itself, as emphasized by the phrases ‘*sangam thyktvo*’ (verse 5.10, 18.6) or ‘*mukta sanga*’ (verse 3.9) I have already noted and in verse 5.13 — which is another favourite of mine:

सर्वकर्माणि मनसा संन्यस्यास्ते सुखं वशी ।
नवद्वारे पुरे देही नैव कुर्वन्न कारयन् ॥

My Favourite 3

“The self controlled embodied being, renouncing all actions mentally, rest at ease in the city of nine gates (human body) neither acting nor causing action.” There is absolutely no running away from any aspect of life. Instead you do a mental renunciation of actions by cutting the link (‘sanga’) and becoming a witness. The analogy is of a person residing in a city is used to describe ‘you’

residing in the body, which acts in the world! In verse 6.4, such a person is characterized through the phrase

सर्वसंकल्पसंन्यासी

“*one who has renounced all mental imagery*”. (The word ‘*sankalpa*’ here is best translated as ‘mental imagery’.) You renounce, dis-identify yourself from, the mental images and thought processes produced by normal chemical reactions in the brain. They come and go, like clouds in the sky but *you are the sky; not the clouds*.

Such a person also does not initiate anything; verse 12.16 describes the person as

सर्वारम्भपरित्यागी

“*One who has given up starting anything, taking fresh initiatives*”. This is a truly remarkable description, when we realize that most of our actions involve taking initiatives. Neither Krishna nor Arjuna — during the ensuing Mahabharata war — refrained from taking initiatives in the normal sense; you don’t win wars by such a procedure. Once again, the ‘*parityagam*’ (giving up) is at the level of mental renunciation.

Since many ethical people gets confused about certain aspects of this message of Gita, let us clarify couple of points. First, let us consider the often asked question: “If Atman is indestructible and body is anyway perishable, is it OK for you to go ahead and kill someone?” Gita does not condone murders committed by normal people, under normal circumstances. *More importantly, it also does not invoke the concept of justifiable homicide*. Krishna does *not* say “Kauravas are evil so it is fine for Arjuna to kill them; killing Bhishmas and Dronas is collateral damage, for the greater good” (Krishna knows full well that attributing blame in a complex chain of events that led to Mahabharata war is not easy!). It also does *not* say “in war you can kill”. Instead, it tells you that, *if you are in a state of non-duality and not emotionally attached to your actions, then whatever you do is fine*. If you are not in that state, normal laws of the land apply. Just as in British Intelligence Service, you need to *earn* your license to kill!

All these boils down to this: You have the right to remain silent and if you give up that right, anything you think will be taken down (as fresh vasanas) and used against you (as a reaction, mental chatter). The ideal is to accept the mental mirandising and remain silent inside while continuously acting in the world. It is the mental detachment from actions rather than the nature of the actions which prevents you from accumulating sin *and virtue*.

The second issue related to the verses which describe the imperishable nature of Atman is the following: One of the two ‘practical’ uses of Gita (the other being to use in court rooms to swear in the witnesses!) is to console someone who has lost a near and dear one by chanting or quoting these verses. Telling a Dad, who has lost his son and is crying, that “Look here, the Atman is eternal and only the body of your son has perished,” is downright stupid and insensitive, to say the least. The normal Dad never knew any Atmans in his life and he is actually sad *about missing the biological body of the son* — not the Atman which was presumably acting through the body; it makes no practical difference to the Dad whether there was some Atman and whether it is eternal or not. Atmans

will not talk, laugh and spend time with the Dad, the way the biological body of the son did. So the eternity of Atman is pretty much useless to the Dad, even if it is true. At that moment, the father's pain is real and one needs to recognize it and be compassionate and practical; not sermonize to him about Atmans.

Invoking Gita and scriptures when one is in pain is at best useless and at worst produces a transient state of consolation. "But, Arjuna learnt about Gita in a crisis, not in peacetime", you might say. But we are talking about two different things. *Arjuna did ask Krishna for advice*. If the Dad who lost his son asks you for guidance, by all means, lecture him on Atman and what not. If the Dad is just overwhelmed with sorrow and is crying his heart out, that is not the time to *impose* your philosophy on him. Just give him some water and hold him.

Leaving aside preaching to others, in your own life, this could be a real problem unless you watch out. If you are not sufficiently distressed all these Gita stuff is just intellectual pastime and no better than reading Norman Vincent Peale. On the other hand, when you are really suffering (severe tooth ache, death of son) you may not have the mental stamina to learn Gita. There is a fine balance you need to find, which is where intelligence plays the role. As I said before, Siddhartha solved this by looking at *other* people's suffering and drawing the correct conclusions, while his life was going quite well! That is the best procedure. The time to implement Gita or Upanishads in your life is *when everything is going fine for you* and you are sitting on the top of the world! At that time, focus on the fact that anything in which your happiness is depending on (your health, wealth, existence of near and dear ones ...) can vanish in no time. And you will die one day. Then try to work out some real life insurance and start searching. Good soldiers train in peacetime to survive the wars and do not try to learn on the job. Real spirituality is best acquired when everything is fine; not after something has gone terribly wrong.

8 *Be true to yourself*

Getting back to the main theme, there are three more aspects that are stressed by Krishna as regards acting in the world. The first, relatively minor one, is the inevitability of action, mentioned in many verses like Verse 3:5:

न हि कश्चित्क्षणमपि जातु तिष्ठत्यकर्मकृत् ।
कार्यते ह्यवशः कर्म सर्वः प्रकृतिजैर्गुणैः

"No one ever remains inactive even for a moment; for all are forcibly made to act by the natural qualities". You can't run away from it, especially when you realize every thought is an act.

The second, and more important, is regarding the broad nature of actions which you might like to indulge in. The famous, and again often misinterpreted verse, is Verse 3:35

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् ।
स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः

the second line of which "*Death while performing swadharma is better; paradharma is fraught with fear*" asks you to act according to your own 'swadharma'

rather than follow ‘*paradharma*’. (The same point is again stated in verse 18.47). Usually the word ‘*dharma*’ is over-interpreted here (as some kind duty which depends on one’s station in life etc.) but all that Krishna intended was the elementary meaning of *dharma*: the ‘innate nature’. One would, for example, say in Sanskrit that “it is the *dharma* of fire to burn”. If you do what your innate nature finds easy to do, (paint if you are a painter and kill if you are a goonda) you have a better chance of being mindful and realizing that “*yoga* is dexterity in action” rather than if you try to do something against your nature (a goonda trying to paint or a painter trying to kill). If you are a painter, Gita tells you how to become a better painter and if you are a thief it teaches you how to be the best thief you could ever be! No value judgements here — just a user’s manual!

The reason Krishna actually succeeds in cajoling Arjuna to fight and kill is because it is Arjuna’s innate nature (see e.g. verse 18.59 which states this explicitly); if Krishna had tried it with a Buddha, he wouldn’t have succeeded. Buddha would have smiled benevolently at Krishna and walked away from the battlefield — in fact, he wouldn’t have asked Krishna what to do, in the first place!

The real problem Arjuna had in the battlefield is *not* one of violence and bloodshed. Arjuna, the most formidable warrior of his times, is not devoted to pacifist ideals and is never squeamish about shedding blood. Neither is Gita, which gives equal emphasis to protecting good guys and destroying the bad guys (verse 4.8):

परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् ।
धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय संभवामि युगे युगे ॥

“*I appear from time to time for protecting the good, for destroying the wicked, and for establishing world order (Dharma)*”. (Incidentally, this is another verse people have tried to twist around in all sorts of ways to make it palatable to pacifism; it just does not work! Krishna’s ‘*vinasayethi dushkritam*’ just means destruction of those who do bad things. Very simple and direct.) What bothered Arjuna in the battlefield was *attachment* and love to people like Bhishma or Drona and certain moral qualms as to whom one can kill and whom one cannot. *His problem had nothing to do with the doctrine of non-violence*. A Buddha of compassion does not kill, period. He would not say “I cannot kill X because he is my guru; I cannot kill Y because he is my cousin”. He will say “I cannot kill”; that is it! Arjuna’s disease was totally different and Krishna correctly diagnosed (and cured) it.

The third point, closely related to the above, is not so much in what is said by Krishna as in what was *not* said by him. He does not lecture you on morals. All in all, Krishna emphasizes — through his life as well as through Gita — the contextual nature of morality, which is so unique to Hindu philosophy. (It is only much later, due to the influence of other, less flexible, religions, that Hinduism degenerated and became moralistic!). This is something utterly fascinating about Krishna in contrast to many other morality driven characters in the Mahabharata. For example, once, when things were getting a bit out of hand in the war and Arjuna was slipping up, Krishna decided to let go of his promise of not to take up weapons and just jump into the fray! “Sure I made a promise but this situation requires me to break it; so the deal is off, folks!”

is the attitude! Contrast this with Bhishma, whose life was sheer hell because of all the promises he decided to stick to! Only a truly enlightened being (or a total crook) can guiltlessly transcend morality. Given his own ‘adaptability’ regarding morals, it is no wonder that Krishna does not preach. Krishna’s life was (and yours will be if you read Gita right) a celebration in totality, thanks to this attitude.

9 Your Immunity from Prosecution

What I have discussed above covers the core of several chapters of Gita which describes how you should convert every action in your life into meditation. Other verses essentially elaborate on this theme, for example explaining the nature of a man of equanimity etc. (Compared to Upanishads, Gita works on verbose mode, possibly because Arjuna is a bit slow on the uptake!). But there is another major, complementary, theme which runs through Gita which deserves attention: this is the theme of Devotion/Surrender (*‘Bhakti’*) and probably somewhat more confusing to the modern mind.

To understand this theme, let us get into the practicality of being mindful and ask why living in the present is so difficult. Your mindfulness vanishes when the mind brings up a thought of “its own” and distracts your attention. Just a sec! What is all these “its own” and “your attention” nonsense ? Isn’t it *your* mind? Or does the mind have a mind of its own ? Clearly this is getting ridiculous.

It is ridiculous but unfortunately it is also true. You certainly would have noticed that a lot goes on in your brain which is not at your bidding even when you are awake. And when you are asleep, you dream — and this is definite proof that “you” and the mind (or whatever biological/chemical infrastructure that creates the dream) are different. You can’t hold on to a single thought to the exclusion of everything else for any reasonable amount of time, so clearly “you” are not in control. Of course, you can’t decide on your dreams before going to sleep either. (Wow, how nice *that* would be!). So the *theory* of mindfulness is all fine but you need help to put it in *practice*.

There are two ways of getting around this difficulty and ensuring that your brain has a less fragmented existence. The first one is impressive for its direct frontal attack on the problem (Verse 6-26):

यतो यतो निश्चरति मनश्चञ्चलमस्थिरम् ।
ततस्ततो नियम्येतदात्मन्येव वशं नयेत्

My Favourite 4

“*Whenever the restless and unsteady mind wanders, from that object it should be restrained and brought back under the control of the Self alone.*” When a random thought arises in the mind, become aware of it and gently get the mind back to the task at hand. Keep doing it! This determination (vairagya) and practice (abhyasa) will get you there and Gita says this explicitly in Verse 6-35

असंशयं महाबाहो मनो दुर्निग्रहं चलम् ।
अभ्यासेन तु कौन्तेय वैराग्येण च गृह्यते

“*Mind is undoubtedly restless and hard to control; yet by practice and determination it is controlled*” in response to exactly the same query Arjuna raises. All this is Karma yoga and mindfulness and we have already discussed it.

There is, however, an alternative route. *Do not get too personally involved with your own life!* Don't think you are doing anything and recognize that things are being done *through* you. The most famous verse which says this is Verse 18-66

सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं व्रज ।
अहं त्वां सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः

My Favourite 5

the first line of which is “*Leaving aside all your intrinsic qualities, take refuge in Me*”. Once again, the word dharma needs to be translated precisely — as the intrinsic quality. If you do not hold on to anything (possessions, viewpoints, ideas, wishes,) as yours and surrender yourself completely to some other entity (let us call it God), then your mental chatter and anxiety will stop. The situation is similar to a wealthy business man trading in shares worth crores of rupees through an agent. The person who is actually buying and selling is the agent but he hardly has any worries about the market fluctuations — because he knows that he is just an instrument in the hands of the businessman! Once you are an instrument in the hands of God with a point of view “Let Thy will, not mine, be done”, there is nothing for the mind to chatter about. What needs to be done, gets done through you, moment by moment, precisely and correctly with no sense of burden, anxiety or *even responsibility*.

The last bit is important. You are no longer responsible for your actions! In a way every religion had this concept of surrendering to a Personal God but what makes Gita different is this important ‘doctrine of irresponsibility’. In fact, all Hindu rituals end with an extraordinarily clever act of disowning responsibility! At the end of the ritual — whatever it is — you invoke a verse

कायेन वाचा मनसेन्द्रियैर्वा बुद्ध्यात्मना वा प्रकृतेः स्वभावात् ।

करोमि यद्यत् सकलं परस्मै नारायणायेति समर्पयामि ॥

which essentially says: “*Whatever I do with my mind, body, speech or with other senses of my body, or with my intellect or with my innate natural tendencies I give them all up/dedicate them to Narayana.*” So having abdicated all responsibility, you gain no merit or demerit on account of your actions.

The surrender Krishna is talking about is exactly the same. A similar statement occurs in verse 9.27:

यत्करोषि यदश्नासि यज्जुहोषि ददासि यत् ।
यत्तपस्यसि कौन्तेय तत्कुरुष्व मदर्पणम् ॥

“*O Arjuna, whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer as oblation to the sacred fire, whatever charity you give, whatever austerity you perform, do all that as an offering unto Me.*” He specifically says in several places that one who acts after such a surrender is not tainted by the actions. He does not create fresh *vasanas* either, which, as we discussed, is important. He can kill without incurring any sin. In the verses 5.8-10, Krishna explicitly lists a whole lot of actions which does not induce a sense of responsibility on the doer:

नैव किञ्चित्करोमीति युक्तो मन्येत तत्त्ववित् ।
पश्यञ्शृण्वन्स्पृशन्निघ्नन्गच्छन्स्वपञ्चसन्

प्रलपन्विषजन्तुन्मिषन्निमिषन्नपि ।
इन्द्रियाणीन्द्रियाथेषु वर्तन्त इति धारयन्
ब्रह्मण्याधाय कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा करोति यः ।
लिप्यते न स पापेन पद्मपत्रमिवाम्भसा

“The wise who know the truth think: I do nothing at all. In seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, walking, sleeping, breathing, speaking, giving, taking,... as well as opening and closing the eyes, a Sanyasi believes that only the senses are operating upon their objects. One who does all work as an offering to the Lord abandoning selfish attachment to the results remains untouched by reaction or sin, just as a lotus leaf never gets wet by water.” Just to make it clear to the meanest intelligence, Krishna also contrasts it with the opposite kind of egoistic man in verses 16.13-14 who thinks he did this and he did that, in all his actions!

This is a totally logical conclusion but other religions (which also involve devotion to a Personal God) will first ask you to surrender and then give you a series of do’s and don’ts — which is ridiculous. If I am making choices of any kind I have not surrendered and if I have surrendered I cannot be held responsible for my actions! *Gita guarantees to you immunity from prosecution* which other religions stop short of.

It is rather amusing and even incongruous to the modern mind that Gita effortlessly switches back and forth between fairly abstract, meditation like, concepts and intensely devotional parts. In fact, the very verse from which I quoted “fight without fever”, (Verse 3-35) in full reads as follows:

मयि सर्वाणि कर्माणि संन्यस्याध्यात्मचेतसा ।
निराशीर्निर्ममो भूत्वा युध्यस्व विगतज्वरः

My Favourite 6

“Renouncing all actions in Me, with your mind resting on the Self and giving up the idea of ownership, fight without fever(ish agitations)”. It makes sense either with Karma Yoga, as I described earlier, or with simple devotion. Clearly, Krishna sees no difficulty in asking for personal devotion *as a means for* mindfulness and equanimity. The Verse 9:22

अनन्याश्चिन्तयन्तो मां ये जनाः पर्युपासते ।
तेषां नित्याभियुक्तानां योगक्षेमं वहाम्यहम्

tells you that “I take care of the Yogashema of those who think of nothing else and worship me”. The word ‘yogashema’ should be translated as ‘shema (protection or safety or welfare) of the yoga’. If the devotion is at such a level that you think of nothing else, you have effectively achieved mindfulness and your yoga is safe.

To be fair, there is a lot in Gita which helps one to feel devoted to a Personal God. Most of the description of Godhood in Gita is no different from any other religious scripture — Krishna invokes himself to be eternal, omniscient, omnipotent and generally omni-everything. It is easy to feel devotion to such an entity; you just need simple faith.

There are, however, two chapters (10 and 11) which present a somewhat more subtle concept of God, which is worth exploring. The first one is chapter 10, in which Krishna lists those objects and concepts with which he identifies most (Of Vedas, the Sama Veda; of Devas, Indra etc.). Taken literally, this is absurd; God is everywhere and in everything according to Krishna, so there is

no way of identifying a few as exclusive embodiments of God. Of course, what is intended is the idea that someone could be helped in his devotion/surrender by some concrete pointers of Godliness. In fact any such set would have been fine and the idea is just to give some reasonable set.⁴

Some of the individual choices are, however, noteworthy. I have already mentioned that among those who argue, Krishna identifies himself with logical dialogue. More amusingly, Verse 10:36 says

द्यूतं छलयतामस्मि तेजस्त

“I am gambling among those who deceive”; once again we see that there are no moral issues — God’s glory exist even among those who deceive! And finally, here is a favourite of mine which gives the most succinct definition of Godliness:

यद्यद्विभूतिमत्स्त्वं श्रीमदूर्जितमेव वा ।
तत्तदेवावगच्छ त्वं मम तेजोऽशसंभवम्

My Favourite 7

“Whatever is glorious or excellent or pre-eminent, know that is born of a portion of my splendor” . Get these into your life and you are getting God in. While such concepts exist in different scriptures to varying degrees, it is stated most explicitly in Gita.

10 Does God exist?

To the modern mind, concepts like yoga, meditation etc. are easier to accept than the devotion or surrender to a Personal God. The latter requires enormous faith in the concept of a Personal God or its equivalent. Also, it works only if the surrender is total — you can’t hold on to some acts and let the poor Lord take responsibility for the rest. Finally it requires a total sense of acceptance of whatever is thrust upon you. By and large, the modern mind finds it difficult to accept and use this method. But in the context of Arjuna, there was no compulsion to be ‘cool’ and one could try anything that worked!

“That is fine as a crutch”, you will ask, “but does the Personal God exist? How can I surrender to someone who is probably not there?”. This academic curiosity about the existence of God is as old as mankind and, from the point of view of Gita and Upanishads, a *completely irrelevant* question. Let me explain.

To begin with, from a simple pragmatic point of view, most people *do* have some kind of belief system not founded on logical, scientific, facts. Most people believe in some kind of ill-defined “power” to varying degrees. Many are willing to admit it (though they will not be able to defend it) while the more sophisticated ones will keep their belief a secret or even deny it. What they all lack is the courage to push this belief to its extreme and totally surrender to this “power” which they occasionally invoke to win a lottery or have a kid. As we discussed earlier, there are four kinds of people — the distressed person, the curious one, the seeker of wealth and the man of knowledge — who turn to God. But while talking about devotion to God, Krishna is *not* talking about a local God who will cure your toothache; and he is certainly not talking about bringing the God in *only when* the tooth aches or to satisfy your intellectual

⁴There is a similar dialogue between the Sage Uddava and Krishna in another scripture, in which a similar set is given. That the sets are *not* identical proves the point.

curiosity or to appear spiritual. *Such Gods do not exist* and these guys are wasting their time.

He is talking about a God to whom you surrender completely. If you do that, the God will exist for you with as much reality as Bhavadharini existed for Ramakrishna. To use an analogy of his, if you want to see God with the same level of desperation as a man seeks air when his head is pushed under water, the God will become a reality for you. But if your surrender or devotion is less than one hundred percent, God does not exist and what you get out of prayers and pujas is similar to the relief you get by visiting a psychiatrist. (Some of the Gods can be more expensive than psychiatrists so you may want to reconsider your options!). So whether God exists for you or not depends entirely on you!

Most of the confusion in the debates about the so called existence-of-God arises because people have an illusion of ‘objective reality’ and believe existence should have this ‘objective reality’. When the theist claims, “Look, Ramakrishna saw God as clearly as he saw people around him so God must exist” or when an atheist claims “I have never experienced God so he does not exist”, both are being stupid. They are making the implicit assumption (based on the Aristotelian logic) that “God either exists or does not exist” for everyone, on the presumption that existence has an absolute reality.

But little thought should tell you that the concept of reality is relative and not absolute. In the ultimate analysis, *nothing* (book, computer, Milky Way galaxy, your leg, nature and its laws.....) exists outside of your mind. In fact you have in you the power to change the nature of reality as perceived by you by taking LSD or — more legally — by going to sleep and dreaming. When you sleep and dream — or when you hallucinate high on drugs — what you experience is real for you but the normal material world disappears for you. The objects and experiences you have in the dream will obey completely different laws of physics, say, compared to what you see in the wakeful state. A friend standing nearby cannot share your hallucinations and dreams and will deny their reality. On the other hand, when you get back to normal state, you can ask your friend whether the normal material world existed for him and he will say ‘yes’ (unless he was stealing a nap, himself). You then *conjecture*, based on the continuity of memory that it is ‘you’ who slept but the material world continued to exist. This is why we attribute to the wakeful state a larger level of reality compared to the dream state of yours. But just because someone else perceives the world when you sleep — or are high on drugs — does not make the reality of the world *absolute* because that someone else is also your mental perception in your wakeful state and memories!

It should be now clear that there is nothing logically wrong in the existence of another state of consciousness (let me call it ‘state-X’ for convenience) in which all the material world becomes your super-dream. This state has the same relation to the normal wakeful state as the wakeful state has to the dream state. What you experience in that state-X should be attributed a higher level of reality compared to your wakeful state just as you attribute a higher level of reality to what you perceive in wakeful state compared to your dream-state. The laws of nature you are aware of in your wakeful state have no relevance in state-X just as the laws governing phenomena in your dream has no relevance in your wakeful state. So the subjective existence of God, when you are at particular state of consciousness, is only a consequence of the fact that *all existence perceived in wakeful, dream and deep-sleep states is subjective.*

In fact, the only objective reality is beyond these three states of consciousness (deep sleep, dream, wakeful) but that non-dual state cannot be verbalized staying within these three states. “But”, you ask, “does this state-X exist?” Well, that is like asking whether the wakeful state exists while you are dreaming in your sleep. If you knew the dream was a dream (while dreaming of a tiger) and that the wakeful state *does* exist, you wouldn’t have woken up with a sweat after such a nightmare of a tiger chasing you! No amount of logical argumentation while you are dreaming will prove to you that the wakeful state exists; and there is no way to prove or disprove to you that state-X exists, when you are in your normal wakeful state.

Fortunately, Gita (unlike this article!) does not enter into such metaphysical discussion, for three pertinent reasons: (a) Such debates are stupid and useless; the experience beyond mind cannot be verbalized and all absolute reality is beyond mind. (b) In the context of Gita, it has no relevance; when the Personal God is sitting in front in your chariot and giving you a lecture, it is a bit silly — if not downright insulting — to doubt his existence! (c) As I said, there are two parallel themes in Gita and only *one* of them relies on surrender to the Personal God; if you do not want to do it and think that all this God business is nonsense after ‘reflecting on it fully’, why, surely you can still use what is acceptable to you, and Krishna doesn’t mind. Real Gods don’t feel insecure if you tell them they do not exist.

11 *Future is Present*

Another aspect of Personal God arises in chapter 11 which — as the description goes — involves Arjuna experiencing a Cosmic Form (*ViswaRupa*, loosely translated) of Krishna. The Cosmic Form, among other things demonstrates to Arjuna in a mystic way the acausality of events; and he sees the Past, Present and Future all rolled into one and realizes that he is merely an agent in the inevitable sequence of events. For example, verses 11.26-27 describe Arjuna seeing how Kauravas are being crushed under the teeth of Krishna in the Cosmic Form which, somewhat metaphorically shows the future. When Arjuna is bewildered and asks about the real nature of the Cosmic Form, Krishna identifies himself with Time:

कालो ऽस्मि लोकक्षयकृत्प्रवृद्धो
लोकान्समाहर्तुमिह प्रवृत्तः ।
ऋते ऽपि बा न भविष्यन्ति सर्वे
ये ऽवस्थिताः प्रत्यनीकेषु योधाः ॥

“*I am the terrible Time, the destroyer of people and am here proceeding to destroy them; even without you all these warriors in every division shall cease to be.*” The sense of surrender to a God is natural when one realizes that personal doership is a myth and this is one aspect which is dramatically brought forth in merging the future with the present.

Again, what is not explicitly stated but crucial to understand is the fact that time, along with the notions of past and future, is just a mental construct devoid of more absolute significance. While this is a fairly trivial concept to grasp if you think about it logically, most people (especially physicists, who should know how to think logically!) find it mysterious or down-to-earth absurd. If you sleep

at night, dream and wake up, you should know that *your* notion of time — along with those of the past and future — goes for a toss during the dream-state of consciousness. When you wake up, you establish an *a posteriori* sense of continuity in the notion of time only because your memories come out intact in the morning — including that of going to sleep. The key phrase is ‘your memories’. There is an assumed substratum (‘you’) to whom all memories are attributed. If the ‘you’ who went to sleep is different from the ‘you’ who wakes up, the whole thing won’t work.

The usual ‘you’ is that of the wakeful state of consciousness, with a timeline, past, future associated with it. During this state, it is indeed the continuous chatter of the mind — and your identification with it — that marks the flow of time, distinguishing the past from the future. Once the chatter ceases, and you are no longer identified with the mind, the flow of time cannot even be defined for you. A glimpse of this is experienced in deep sleep when the notion of time is suspended; when you wake up it is only by correlating past memories which you identify as ‘yours’, that the notion of timeline is resurrected across the deep sleep state.

But, as we discussed before, Gita recognizes a non-dual state-X in which the normal wakeful state will appear to be a dream. The normal memories and the associated notion of time, causality, etc. which you swear by in the normal wakeful state have no relevance in state-X just as the notion of time in the dream you had yesterday night has no relevance when you woke up today morning. You cling to the idea of time and causality in your wakeful state only because you still have not woken up into state-X. (Anyone who has, will not be able to convey it to you any better, just as you cannot convey your notion of time to a guy sleeping next to you; each is on his own.) If you observe, very very carefully, you will find that you have no real continuity of memory even in the wakeful state. Just try remembering all the thoughts that went through your mind in the last 15 minutes and you will fail miserably. Nevertheless, you have a certain sense of continuity as “you” and this sense of continuity survives sleep, dreams and even anesthesia and occasionally comas. To a great extent, it is related to your memory bank but it clearly shows that there is definitely a common link across all these states — the ‘true you’, which was awake through the dreams and deep sleep and through the anesthesia you had for the surgery. Just get hold of it and you will wake up to state-X in which only You, He, Brahman, Atman, Nothing, This, That, God whatever you call it, exist with no duality.

Some of the very early verses (like 2.16) of Gita actually refer to this. The normal wakeful state of yours — even granting retrospective continuity over daily sleep and dreams, because of identification with retained memories — came into existence with your earliest childhood memories of age one or so and — from a biochemical point-of-view — cannot go beyond cremation of the body after death. Ashes, as far as we know, do not retain memories. So the entire wakeful state is transient and exists during the lifetime of the body. This *transience makes it conceptually identical to the dream state*, which also lasts for a finite time during the sleep. The state-X, in contrast, has the non-dual Existence, known by many names and is not transient. Obviously, there is no notion of time in state-X.

Incidentally, your normal wakeful state is clearer than the dream state and is less fragmented. The state-X you wake up to is far more integrated with no

duality of any kind; only you exist. Can you go back and forth between state-X and others? You can if you want to — just as you go to sleep each day and dream. Buddha lived for years after his nirvana and so did many other Zen Masters (drawing water and chopping wood) and sages. In fact, the caricature of Krishna in Mahabharata is that of such a person. Something changes, of course, but that is purely internal.

So you realize that the time in wakeful state has no meaning in state-X and is only a shade better than the timeline in your dream yesterday night. With this backdrop, there is nothing mysterious about past, present and future defined with respect to one state, coexisting in another state. Gita just presents it in a poetic form. Demolishing the concept of time and notions of past, present and future is probably the most important feature of the chapter on Viswarupa.

12 *Does it make sense?*

As I said right at the beginning, Gita verses and chapters do not proceed with the same logical clarity of some of the other scriptures. So to put it all together and make sense one needs to grasp the broad picture first and then fit in the details.

The key message of Gita is the same as that of all other scriptures. There is a state-X, to use the terminology of last section, to which you — who is currently asleep and dreaming in the so called wakeful state — can *really* wake up to. This state is non-dual and timeless and what exists for you after you wake up can be called by any name. (Upanishads call it Brahman while Buddha called it Nothing!) Beyond this, it is impossible to convey anything about this state at the level of normal mind and intellect.

The first question is: “Is this true?”. This question cannot be answered — almost by definition — any more than you can prove to a guy who is sleeping, dreaming of a tiger and screaming that it is a dream and a wakeful state exists. So if you are waiting for a logical proof before taking further steps in your life you will wait for a very long time!

The second question is: “OK, may be it exists; why should *I* care?”. This can be answered in many ways. First of all, “No, you need not care” is a perfectly valid answer. But if you think you are better off having access to a completely non-dual state, because you are fed up with the usual states you are in, may be you should care about it and ask how to wake-up. *It is just an option available to you.* On the other hand, there are people driven entirely by a spirit of adventure — the same spirit which makes you climb Everest or do deep sea diving — who want to get it. Just everyday experience with your mind, thoughts, etc. tells you that ‘you’ are not in control of your thoughts, dreams etc. If that fact disturbs you, you may want to do something about it. That is a good start.

Make sure you do not confuse curiosity with the spirit of adventure! Curiosity is the non-participatory, play-it-safe route of *watching* the mountains in the National Geographic channel. The spirit of adventure is what makes you risk loss of limb or life and *climb* the mountain. You may be very curious to know about state-X, thoughtless mind, God talking to you and all sorts of stuff but may also want to play it safe, without endangering anything which you are currently clinging to — your body, mind, memories, wife, children, job, wealth

This academic curiosity is totally useless in this domain — unlike in watching mountains without climbing — and you will make *absolutely no progress*. Unless you are sufficiently reckless and are willing to risk it all with no guarantees — exactly the way an adventurous explorer will approach uncharted terrains — you will *not* wake up to it. As I said before the Curious Ones are the worst of the lot in their delusion.

Assuming you do want to wake up to state-X, the scriptures and Gita can be of help to you. (Not that you need it; just catching hold of *I* will do. But if you need help, it is available.) As I described in the earlier sections, Gita offers two themes for this. The first one is a path of mindfulness — essentially the same as in Zen — in which you lead your life with complete awareness. The second is to invoke a God, identify it with a manifestation, or symbol, of that which exists in the non-dual state, and surrender to it completely. You do nothing but the God acts through and expresses through you. *Whatever happens, you accept it*. Whichever the way the wind blows, it is the same with you.

Sometimes, people confuse this surrender and acceptance with the idea of fate, law of karma etc. No, they are completely different. The idea of fate is usually invoked to ‘explain’ why bad things happen to good people. If you lose a leg in an accident and you say “This is terrible; this must be because of my fate”; the crucial point is that you have introduced an element of judgment “This is terrible”. The acceptance and surrender to God which Gita talks about cannot co-exist with individual judgment — because there is no individual to judge! If you lose your leg you accept it; you do not *first* label it as “terrible” and *then* pretend you accept it. That is just helplessness finding an excuse. When you have really surrendered to God, you will again be in a thoughtless state-X, without introducing judgments and labels. If nothing is labeled as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ you don’t need to invoke fate to explain them. There is no law of karma to a man in state-X.

The mechanism — to the extent one could call it that — behind both mindfulness and surrender to God is essentially the same. In the language of Patanjali, the enlightenment requires a way of stopping fresh vasanas from being created, destroying the mind and playing out the existing vasanas. Mindful actions do not create fresh vasanas and, of course, directly eliminate the mind. As time goes on, such actions also exhaust the pre-existing vasanas as well. When you act after surrendering to your God, the same effects are achieved. Fresh vasanas are not created because the individual ego has surrendered to God, the mind is destroyed for the same reason and the actions which continue to occur exhaust the pre-existing vasanas.

So, does it makes sense? Reflect on it fully and do what you like!