The Bhagavad Gita

STEPHEN MITCHELL

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CONTENTS

Cover
About the Book
About the Translator
Also by Stephen Mitchell
Title Page
Dedication
Introduction
About the Translation

CHAPTER 1: Arjuna’s Despair
CHAPTER 2: The Practice of Yoga
CHAPTER 3: The Yoga of Action
CHAPTER 4: The Yoga of Wisdom
CHAPTER 5: The Yoga of Renunciation
CHAPTER 6: The Yoga of Meditation
CHAPTER 7: Wisdom and Realization
CHAPTER 8: Absolute Freedom
CHAPTER 9: The Secret of Life
CHAPTER 10: Divine Manifestations
CHAPTER 11: The Cosmic Vision
CHAPTER 12: The Yoga of Devotion
CHAPTER 13: The Field and Its Knower
CHAPTER 14: The Three *Gunas*
CHAPTER 15: The Ultimate Person
CHAPTER 16: Divine Traits and Demonic Traits
CHAPTER 17: Three Kinds of Faith

CHAPTER 18: Freedom Through Renunciation

Notes to the Introduction
APPENDIX: “The Message of the Gita” by Mohandas K. Gandhi
Acknowledgments
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About the Book

‘The Gita presents some of the most important truths of human existence ... its purpose is to transform your life’ – from the Introduction by *Stephen Mitchell*

The *Bhagavad Gita*, or ‘Song of the Spirit’, is the best known book of India’s national epic The *Mahabharata*. Based on a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna on the eve of a great battle, it is held to be the essence of Hindu spirituality, sacred literature and yoga, as well as exploring the great universal themes of courage, honour, death, love, virtue and fulfilment.

Hugely popular in India, and well loved around the globe, the *Bhagavad Gita* is an instruction manual for spiritual practice and a guide to peace of heart. It is also among the finest works of world literature and the beauty of its poetic language is extraordinary.

This particular edition is a major new translation by Stephen Mitchell, the celebrated interpreter and translator of such classics as the *Tao Te Ching*. It will be of interest to the large number of contemporary spiritual seekers – of any faith or none – as well as students of Vedic literature. It will be of particular fascination to anyone who asks: ‘How should I live?’

About the Translator

Stephen Mitchell's widely acclaimed translations of the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Bhagavad Gita* are respected the world over. He lives in California.

BY STEPHEN MITCHELL

POETRY

Parables and Portraits

FICTION

The Frog Prince

Meetings with the Archangel

NONFICTION

The Gospel According to Jesus

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The Bhagavad Gita

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(with James A. Autry)

Full Woman, Fleshly Apple. Hot Moon:
Selected Poems of Pablo Neruda

Genesis

Ahead of All Parting:
The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke

A Book of Psalms

The Selected Poetry of Dan Pagis

Tao Te Ching

The Book of Job

The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai
(with Chana Bloch)

The Sonnets to Orpheus

The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christoph Rilke

Letters to a Young Poet

The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge

The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke

EDITED BY STEPHEN MITCHELL

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Words from the Masters to Illuminate the Spiritual Path

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Song of Myself
Into the Garden:
A Wedding Anthology (*with Robert Hass*)
The Enlightened Mind: An Anthology of Sacred Prose
The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry
Dropping Ashes on the Buddha:
The Teaching of Zen Master Seung Sahn

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BOOKS ON TAPE

Bhagavad Gita
Full Woman, Fleshly Apple, Hot Moon
The Frog Prince
Meetings with the Archangel
Real Power
Bestiary
Genesis
Duino Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus
The Gospel According to Jesus
The Enlightened Mind
The Enlightened Heart
Letters to a Young Poet
Parables and Portraits
Tao Te Ching
The Book of Job
Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke

The Bhagavad Gita

A New Translation
Stephen Mitchell

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In honour of

Shri Ramana Maharshi

Introduction

I

ONE OF THE best ways of entering the Bhagavad Gita is through the enthusiasm of Emerson and Thoreau, our first two American sages. Emerson mentions the Gita often in his Journals, with the greatest respect:

> It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age & climate had pondered & thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us.

Thoreau speaks of it in awed superlatives:

> The reader is nowhere raised into and sustained in a higher, purer, or *rarer* region of thought than in the Bhagvat-Geeta. . . . Beside [it], even our Shakespeare seems sometimes youthfully green and practical merely.

What a revelation the Gita must have been for minds predisposed to its largehearted vision of the world. And what a delight to stand behind Emerson and Thoreau, reading over their shoulders as they discover this "stupendous and cosmogonal" poem in which, from the other side of the globe, across so many centuries, they can hear the voice of the absolutely genuine. Here is a kinsman, an elder brother, telling them truths that they already, though imperfectly, know, truths that are vital to them and

to us all. In the Gita's wisdom, as in an ancient, clear mirror, they find that they can recognize themselves.

Souls who love God, a Sufi sheikh said a thousand years ago, "know one another by smell, like horses. Though one be in the East and the other in the West, they still feel joy and comfort in each other's talk, and one who lives in a later generation than the other is instructed and consoled by the words of his friend."

II

Bhagavad Gita means "The Song of the Blessed One." No one knows when it was written; some scholars date it as early as the fifth century B.C.E., others as late as the first century C.E. But there is general scholarly consensus that in its original form it was an independent poem, which was later inserted into its present context, Book Six of India's national epic, the Mahabharata.

The Mahabharata is a very long poem—eight times the length of the Iliad and the Odyssey combined—that tells the story of a war between the two clans of a royal family in northern India. One clan is the Pandavas, who are portrayed as paragons of virtue; they are led by Arjuna, the hero of the Gita, and his four brothers. Opposing them are the forces of the Kauravas, their evil cousins, the hundred sons of the blind King Dhritarashtra. At the conclusion of the epic, the capital city lies in ruins and almost all the combatants have been killed.

The Gita takes place on the battlefield of Kuru at the beginning of the war. Arjuna has his charioteer, Krishna (who turns out to be God incarnate), drive him into the open space between the two armies, where he surveys the combatants. Overwhelmed with dread and pity at the imminent death of so many brave warriors—brothers, cousins, and kinsmen—he drops his weapons and refuses to

fight. This is the cue for Krishna to begin his teaching about life and deathlessness, duty, nonattachment, the Self, love, spiritual practice, and the inconceivable depths of reality. The “wondrous dialogue” that fills the next seventeen chapters of the Gita is really a monologue, much of it wondrous indeed, which often keeps us dazzled and asking for more, as Arjuna does:

> for I never can tire of hearing
> your life-giving, honey-sweet words. (10.18)

The incorporation of the Gita into the Mahabharata has both its fortunate and its unfortunate aspects. It gives a thrilling dramatic immediacy to a poem that is from beginning to end didactic. Krishna and Arjuna speak about these ultimate matters not reclining at their ease, or abstracted from time and place, but between two armies about to engage in a devastating battle. We see the ranks of warriors waiting in the adrenaline rush before combat, keying up their courage, drawing their bows, glaring across the battle lines; we hear the din of the conch horns, the neighing of the horses, the thunder of the captains and the shouting. Then, suddenly, everything is still. The armies are halted in their tracks. Even the flies are caught in midair between two wingbeats. The vast moving picture of reality stops on a single frame, as in Borges’s story “The Secret Miracle.” The moment of the poem has expanded beyond time, and the only characters who continue, earnestly discoursing between the silent, frozen armies, are Arjuna and Krishna.

In one sense, this setting seems entirely appropriate. The subject of Krishna’s teaching is, after all, a matter of the gravest urgency: the battle for authenticity, the life and death of the soul. And in all spiritual practice, the struggle against greed, hatred, and ignorance, against the ingrained selfishness that has covered over our natural luminosity,

can for a long time be as ferocious as any external war. During this time even the slightest clarity or opening of the heart is a major triumph, and metaphors of victory and defeat, of conquering our enemies and overcoming fierce obstacles, seem only too accurate, as if they were straightforward description.

Yet from a clearer perspective, not only is there nothing to overcome, there is no one in particular to overcome it. Metaphors of struggle may just make the phantom dramas of the mind more solid, thus perpetuating the struggle, since even high spiritual warfare is one of the ego's self-aggrandizing dreams. After a while, all this struggle drops away naturally. The spiritually mature human being lets all things come and go without effort, without desire for any foreseen result, carried along on the current of a vast intelligence. As the great twentieth-century Hindu sage Ramana Maharshi said, "The idea that there is a goal . . . is wrong. We *are* the goal; we are always peace. To get rid of the idea that we are not peace is all that is required."

Actually, a good case can be made that the Gita's answer about war—according to which, since the war is "just," Arjuna should do his duty as a warrior, stand up like a man, and fight—is directly contradictory to the deeper lessons that Krishna teaches. How indeed can an enlightened sage, who cherishes all beings with equal compassion because he sees all beings within himself and himself within God, inflict harm on anyone, even wicked men who have launched an unjust war? This is still an open question, whatever Krishna may say. No fixed statement of the truth can apply to all circumstances, and honorable men, during every war within memory, have come to opposite conclusions about what their duty is. Gandhi, who thought of the Gita as his "eternal mother," is almost convincing when he says that the deepest spiritual awareness necessarily implies absolute nonviolence. On the other hand, I can imagine even a buddha enlisting in the war against Hitler.

Nevertheless, whether or not Arjuna should fight is at most a secondary question for the Gita. The primary question is, How should we live?

III

Or, more essentially, How should *I* live? For the Gita is a book of deeply personal instruction. When you approach it as a sacred text, you can't help standing, at first, in the place where Arjuna stands, confused and eager for illumination. Whatever intellectual or esthetic satisfaction it may provide, its purpose is to transform your life.

The Gita presents some of the most important truths of human existence in a language that is clear, memorable, and charged with emotion. It is a poem, of course, and not a systematic manual. Its method is not linear but circular and descriptive. It returns to its central point—letting go of the fruits of action—again and again, addressing not only superior students but also the great majority, who are spiritually unfocused and slow to grasp the point: "Let go."—*What does that mean?* "It means this."—*I don't get it*. "It means that."—*I still don't get it*. "Then let me paint you a picture."—*But* how *do I let go?* "Just act in this way."—*But I can't.* "All right, then act in that way."—*But what if I can't do that either?* "All right, here's still another approach." Thus, generously, patiently, the poem guides even the least gifted of us on the path toward freedom.

One of the Gita's most effective methods of teaching is its portrait of the sage, the person who has entirely let go. This portrait is among the finest in world literature. Though not as subtle as the portrait of the Master in the Tao Te Ching, it is more easily comprehensible. Though not as profound as the wild, marvelous nonfigurative image that emerges from the dialogues of the Chinese Zen Masters, it is profound enough, and more obviously filled with the inestimable quality that we call "heart." In elaborate, loving detail, the

Gita poet describes what it is like to have grown beyond the sense of a separate self, to live centered in the deathless reality at the core of our being. It is a theme he never tires of. He returns to it in almost every chapter of the poem, emphasizing now one aspect, now another, lavish with his adjectives, trying in any way he can to ignite the reader with a passionate admiration of the enlightened human being, the mature and fully realized “man of yoga.” the person that all of us, men and women alike, are capable of becoming because that is who we all essentially are.

Of the various paths to self-realization—*karma yoga* (the path of action), *jñana yoga* (the path of knowledge or wisdom), *raja yoga* (the path of meditation), and *bhakti yoga* (the path of devotion or love)—the poet clearly prefers the last. But he is aware that for people of different constitutions and affinities, different paths are appropriate. When he says that one particular path is superior, his statement doesn’t come at the expense of the other paths. All paths and all people are included.

Whatever their differences, the basic progression along each of these paths to no goal is similar. We begin spiritual practice by confronting, with a rude shock, the selfishness and obstinacy of the raw mind. This mind, as Arjuna says,

> is restless, unsteady,
> turbulent, wild, stubborn;
> truly, it seems to me
> as hard to master as the wind. (6.34)

Any genuine path will, with sincere practice, result in a gradual, deepening surrender of selfishness into the ultimate reality that the Gita calls the Self. Just as our primordial craving leads to all the manifold forms of our misery, letting go of our ideas about reality and our desires for particular results leads to freedom.

“Renunciation of the fruits of action,” Gandhi wrote, “is the center around which the Gita is woven. It is the central sun around which devotion, knowledge, and the rest revolve like planets.” This lesson is repeated over and over throughout the Gita, in seemingly endless variations. Just as the essence of Judaism is “Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself” (as Jesus once reminded a sympathetic scribe), the essence of Hinduism is “Let go.” The two statements are, in fact, different entrances into the same truth, which is the beginning and the end of all spiritual practice.

> You have a right to your actions,
> but never to your actions’ fruits.
> Act for the action’s sake.
> And do not be attached to inaction.
>
> Self-possessed, resolute, act
> without any thought of results,
> open to success or failure. (2.47–48)

Or, to rephrase it in the language of the Tao Te Ching:

> Do your work, then step back.
> The only path to serenity.

The Gita’s portrait of the sage may seem like an idealization. It is not. Anyone who has seen the famous photograph of Ramana Maharshi and looked into those inexpressibly beautiful eyes will know what I am talking about.

Ramana Maharshi is only the most dazzling modern instance of a long tradition in India. It is a tradition with a strongly ascetic flavor. This kind of sage barely notices his body and its needs, has no use for money or possessions, and is blithely indifferent to art, society, and sexual love, not