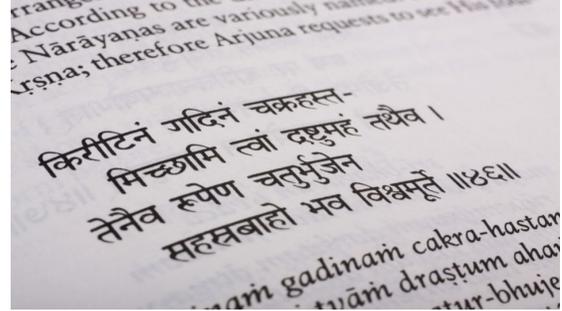


The Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita, translated as *The Lord's Song* or *The Divine Song*, is arguably the most well known and widely read scripture in the Hindu canon. Though originally in Sanskrit, this text of 18 chapters is available in the various regional languages of India, and 75 languages worldwide (in English alone there are some 300 translations).¹ It has been praised as both a philosophical and poetic work of literature, and its teachings are studied in both secular and non-secular contexts.

It is often simply called the Gita.



Set against a battlefield, the Gita holds historical, religious, and allegorical importance. The battle, between the five righteous brothers called the Pandava and their cousins, the 100 corrupt and unethical Kaurava, represents to readers two kinds of battles. It is both an actual battle between good and evil ruling clans, as well as the battle within, that is the struggles experienced throughout life by people from all walks of life -- between mindful decision-making and acting on selfish impulses, knowledge and ignorance, and dharma (righteousness) and adharma (moral corruption). The Bhagavad Gita encompasses ethical and moral lessons pertaining to the four predominant forms of yoga (spiritual paths), dharma, and mastery of gunas (innate tendencies and habits).

Found within the larger Hindu epic of the Mahabharata, the Gita recounts the first ten days of an 18 day war and is a conversation between Arjuna, the warrior hero, and Krishna, one of the most famous avatara (manifestations) of Lord Vishnu, as the two armies line up for the first battle.



It begins with Arjuna feeling psychologically overwhelmed and completely dejected at the thought of battling his kin. He is ready to run away from the battlefield in the name of non-violence and his sense of duty to family. Krishna then explains to him the nuances of dharma from the most Absolute, metaphysical, and theological level down to the most practical, individual level. He shows Arjuna that running away from the battlefield

¹ The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography by Richard H. Davis

would actually be an act of adharmā on the part of Arjuna. Arjuna is a warrior, and he is needed to eradicate the world of the evil forces across him on the battlefield because it benefits the greater good. While nonviolence, moderation, and truthfulness are important parts of dharma and righteousness, Krishna shows Arjuna that in his particular context, the right thing for him to do is for him to pick up arms and fight because Arjuna's duty towards the greater good of society trumps his familial duties.

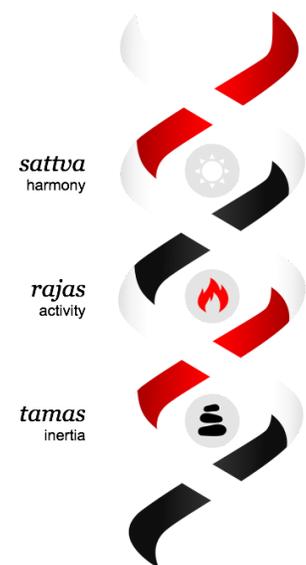
As a part of explaining dharma, Krishna speaks to the nature of reality, and shows Arjuna that the ultimate goal of human life is moksha, or liberation, from the material world. Krishna explains that every situation an individual faces is a product of their past and present thoughts and actions. He teaches that laziness, lack of self-control, not understanding the divine nature of oneself and the Supreme, and trying to find happiness in material things all lead to suffering. He also teaches that true happiness can only be found within oneself and that moksha is bliss.

Thoughts and actions, are shaped by the three gunas, Krishna explains -- sattva (harmony); rajas (activity); and tamas (inertia) -- and are shaped by past and present karma or conduct and actions. They manifest at varying levels and under varying circumstances. He expounds upon the characteristics associated with each guna as well.

Sattvic (state of sattva): good and intelligent energy which brings about balance, harmony, compassion, and selflessness

Rajasic (state of rajas): dynamic and active energy which brings about restlessness, change, passion, and self-centeredness; both positive and negative aspects

Tamasic (state of tamas): cyclical and fixed energy which brings about heaviness, inertia, ignorance, and selfishness; both positive and negative aspects



Krishna then shows Arjuna the four yogas, or paths to moksha. The first path is karma yoga, or the path of selfless action. By this path, individuals do the dharmic, or righteous thing, with no attachments to the rewards or consequences of their efforts. The second path is raja/dhyana yoga, the path of meditation. The third path is jnana yoga, the path of knowledge, which encompasses studying the scriptures to understand the nature of god. The fourth and final path, and perhaps one which Krishna in his conversation seems to favor, is of bhakti, or loving devotion and surrender to God (see module on Yoga, Paths to Moksha for more detailed information on these four paths). While Krishna describes four separate paths, it becomes apparent to the reader that they are not mutually exclusive, meaning any one requires aspects of the others.

When Arjuna still hesitates to pick up his arms and do his duty after this discourse, Krishna shows him his full form as God, and Arjuna sees and understands his role in the universe, and picks up his arms. He is able to let go of attachment to the fruits of his actions, and act in selfless service.

The Gita is considered a core text in Hinduism. It is considered to capture the essence of the Vedas and Upanishads, and also imparts wisdom on dharma and how to live life righteously. It is especially appreciated for its accessibility for diverse audiences. The Gita is considered a source of authority across multiple Hindu philosophical schools.

For many Hindus, the Bhagavad Gita is:

- read and studied as a household text (svādhyāya)
- understood through spiritual discourses and discussion by religious teachers or gurus (satsang)
- chanted or recited with the belief that in addition to the literal teachings, the vibrations of the actual words have the power to advance spiritual progress. Traditionally, the Gita is regarded to have 700 slokas



The Bhagavad Gita is the subject of various forms of art, including painting, sculpture, drama, dance, poetry, and music. It is also studied, by Hindus and non-Hindus alike, for its application in a variety of fields including leadership, management, and ethics.

Associated Festivals and Commemorations:

- The Gita may be chanted in its entirety on Gita Jayanti, the “birth” date of the Gita (December)
- The Gita may also be chanted or read during certain rites of passage, including pregnancy, and during the process of dying and mourning

Key Takeaways

- The Bhagavad Gita is a revered text for Hindus - it is arguably the most well known and most read, due to its accessibility to diverse audiences.
- It is a conversation between Arjun and Krishna regarding how to determine one’s dharma and how to pursue moksha.
- A core theme is detaching from the fruits of one’s actions, be they rewards or consequences, in order to act selflessly and obtain liberation.