

# THE BHAGAVAD GITA AS WAY-SHOWER TO THE TRANSCENDENTAL

JOHN MOFFITT

*Unionville, Virginia*

**A**NYONE WHO knows even slightly the Hindu Bhagavad Gita, "Song of the Lord," recognizes that it is not a work of mere abstract theology or speculative philosophy. It is a practical guide, whose aim is to show spiritual seekers how to commune with what today we like to call the Transcendental. We shall make no mistake in calling it one of the world's most extraordinary scriptures. The Gita, which may be dated about 250 B.C., not only illuminates the teachings of the ancient Upanishads, from which it quotes, but carries them forward in a grand synthesis—a synthesis once more superbly illustrated in the nineteenth century, twenty-one hundred years after its first announcement, in the life experience and influence of the modern saint Ramakrishna.<sup>1</sup>

Those who have studied the religion of the Hindus know how important a scripture it has always been for them: it is one of the three canonical books that form the bedrock of the Vedanta theology—the other two being the Upanishads themselves and the extremely terse aphorisms based on them known as the Vedanta Sutras. Various prestigious medieval theologians, those whom we may call Hindu "scholastic philosophers," have tried in their commentaries on it to demonstrate that the Gita upholds one or another particular system of mystical theology. Yet even they would surely have had to grant that it is first and foremost a practical guide to spirituality. Since, however, there is not always consistency of meaning in certain of the important terms it uses—e.g., yoga, Atman, Brahman—there has always been and always will be a place for commentaries to explain them and it.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of this yoga-shastra, this scripture on the communion of the individual soul with the Universal Soul, is its psychological approach to self-unfoldment. I refer to the fact that the Gita takes into account several different basic types of human character and offers disciplines suited to persons possessing the temper-

<sup>1</sup> Ramakrishna Paramahansa (A.D. 1836-86) is held by many to be, along with his most important disciple, Vivekananda, the prime mover in the revitalization of Hinduism in the nineteenth century. By practicing the spiritual disciplines of the various denominations of Hinduism, he satisfied himself that all faiths, if sincerely followed, led to communion with God. He himself was almost continuously aware of the divine presence in later life, and he inspired Vivekananda to found the now well-known Ramakrishna Mission, whose twofold ideal is realization of God and service to humanity, especially the poor, the starving, the sick, the illiterate.

aments that go with them—disciplines all seen as ways to attain one and the same transcendental vision. “In whatever way men approach me,” says the Lord Krishna, “so I reward them; for it is my path that men follow in all things.”<sup>2</sup> This verse applies not only to the manner in which men approach God, whether with a hidden motive or with motiveless love, but also to the specific *ways* by which they approach him. Implicit in the Gita is the doctrine that the Lord Krishna is to be found at the end of all these ways or yogas.

What are these ways? The Gita suggests four disciplines by which one may achieve communion, through grace, with the Transcendental. They are the way of intuitive wisdom (jnana-yoga) for the predominantly intellectual; the way of consciously practiced mental concentration (raja-yoga) for the meditative; the way of devotional self-giving (bhakti-yoga) for the predominantly emotional; and the way of service in the spirit of worship (karma-yoga) for the active. The Gita never separates these yogas into mutually exclusive paths after the fashion of sectarian theologians. But for the sake of clarity I shall identify the nature and aims of the first three of them somewhat as they have been presented by the theologians. I wish to call special attention to the last of these ways, the yoga of active service, as a medium for communing with the Transcendental; for it is the Gita’s unique contribution to Hindu spirituality. But first let us consider the ways of intuitive wisdom and mental concentration and devotion, since the real meaning of the fourth yoga may be grasped when we have understood the other three taken separately. The synthesis found in the Gita consists in its showing that, for most men and women, what is embodied in the paths of jnana and bhakti by way of revelation and discipline, and by raja-yoga as a matter of equally strenuous mental control, is embodied by the fourth, karma-yoga, in a method of living out those disciplines in everyday life.

#### WAY OF INTUITIVE WISDOM

The way of intuitive wisdom, in its classic formulation, involves an intellectual search leading to intuitive apprehension of ultimate reality. It concerns itself with the nature of the Godhead, the soul, and the world, together with disciplines for opening oneself to the truth. Its original statement is found in the Upanishads, where the Vedic seers have affirmed the identity of Brahman, the reality underlying the physical world, and Atman, the reality underlying the individual self or soul.

<sup>2</sup> Bhagavad Gita 4, 11. Quotations from the Bhagavad Gita in this article are (sometimes adapted) from *The Bhagavad Gita*, translated from the Sanskrit, with notes, comments, and introduction by Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1944). The textual explanations in this volume follow in the main the commentary of Shankara, the ninth-century nondualistic theologian.

Early in the second chapter of the Gita, "The Way of Ultimate Reality," Krishna tells the warrior Arjuna, his disciple, about the nature of reality: "The unreal never truly is. The Real never ceases to be. . . . That by which all this [universe] is pervaded know to be imperishable. None can destroy that which is immutable."<sup>3</sup> Significantly, Krishna begins his discourse by referring to the Self in man, the Atman or true person spoken of in the Upanishads as *sat* or the Real. Implicit here is the idea that the reality of Atman is a matter for immediate experience by each one of us. Our experience of it at present is, except occasionally, little more than a matter of faith: though it is the nearest of the near, our attention is turned for the most part away from it. But that it *can* become a matter of almost continuous experience through the help of intelligent thinking, coupled with self-discipline, is here taken for granted. As we see from the text quoted, reality is what never changes; but it must be remembered that *asat*, the "unreal," is not something illusory or nonexistent; rather it is simply whatever is subject to change. And the real Self is said to be the witness of the constant changes both in the body and mind in which it dwells and in the whole outer world.

It is only much later in the scripture, in chapters 7 and 9, that the complementary doctrine of Brahman is spelled out. But what is described in those chapters must remain at first totally a matter of faith; we have no direct experience of the reality underlying the physical world and so have to rely upon revelation for our knowledge of it. "Earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, reason, and ego: such is the eight-fold division of my nature," Krishna declares. "This is my lower nature. But, different from it, know my higher nature—the indwelling spirit by which the universe is sustained."<sup>4</sup> "By me, in my unmanifest form, all things in the universe are pervaded. All beings exist in me, but I do not exist in them."<sup>5</sup> The idea here is, as the theologian Shankara points out in his commentary on the Gita,<sup>6</sup> that Brahman is incorporeal and hence, though all exists in him, he is not in his true nature connected with any object.

It is in expounding passages such as these, dealing with Atman and with Brahman, that the commentators of the various schools exercise their ingenuity in setting forth their views about the reality underlying

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 2, 16-17.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 7, 4-5. Differing from both the Upanishads and later theologians, the Bhagavad Gita devotes itself preponderantly to Atman in its expounding of the way of intuitive wisdom.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 9, 4.

<sup>6</sup> P. 216. In dealing with intuitive wisdom, my interpretation leans to the approach of the nondualist Shankara; for I consider his interpretation of the Upanishadic texts clearly relating to this path the most faithful.

the individual self and underlying the cosmos. The absolute nondualist Shankara<sup>7</sup> holds that the individual self and the world are in actuality nondifferent from Brahman. The modal nondualist Ramanuja<sup>8</sup> holds that the self and the world are parts of the whole comprised by Brahman. Madhva, a thoroughgoing dualist,<sup>9</sup> holds that the self and the world are separate from Brahman, though eternally related to him. The three views are not necessarily incompatible—something the commentators refuse to see. They may all be taken to represent valid, though differing, spiritual experience. When a person identifies himself with the physical body and the ego-self (as most of us do), he will experience himself to be different from ultimate reality, which he sees as “personal.” When, again, he identifies himself with the Atman known in intellectual ecstasy, and loses the sense of separate selfhood, he will, in recollecting that experience, hold the world to be insubstantial and himself to be nondifferent from ultimate reality, which he sees as “impersonal.” When, finally, he enjoys the immediate sense of the divine presence during the state of everyday awareness, he will then find his relationship to ultimate reality, which he sees as transpersonal, to be one of ineffable difference *and* nondifference. It is when these three views are adhered to as matters of intellectual persuasion or devotional faith, and an attempt is made to apply them to a scripture such as the Gita as a whole, that disagreements arise among theologians (and their followers).

The question of practical disciplines for opening oneself to the Transcendental through the path of intuitive wisdom is another matter, and here there need be no argument. The disciplines recommended by the Gita are taken up at the end of chapter 2.

This celebrated passage<sup>10</sup> offers an extended description of the “man of steady wisdom,” the enlightened soul fully conscious of his or her relationship (as Atman) with Brahman or ultimate reality. It states, in substance, that to become enlightened one must have cast off all desires, including the desire for happiness; as a result, one will have become free from attachment, fear, and anger, and unperturbed by adversity. One must have learned not to rejoice when obtaining good or vexed when obtaining evil. Through mental control, one must have acquired the power to withdraw the senses from attention to sense objects and even from the taste for them, and to remain intent on the Lord Krishna (i.e.,

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the greatest exponent of Nondualistic (Advaita) Vedanta theology, Shankara is said to have lived from A.D. 788 to 820.

<sup>8</sup> The traditional dates for Ramanuja, the leading exponent of Modal (Visishtadvaita) Vedanta theology, are A.D. 1017 to 1137.

<sup>9</sup> The most important exponent of Dualistic (Dvaita) Vedanta theology, Madhva is said to have lived from A.D. 1199 to 1276.

<sup>10</sup> Bhagavad Gita 2, 54–72.

Brahman himself). Thus one becomes free from all the fruits of attachment: desire, anger (at not obtaining what is desired), delusion, failure to recall the lessons of scripture and of the teacher as well as of experience, and loss of discrimination about what is real and what unreal. Only then will one succeed in practicing contemplation on the nature of the Self (the divine spark in a man or woman), and being free of the sense of possessiveness, attain peace and, in the hour of death, liberation from ignorance of the truth.

Just before this passage several verses have explained the proper attitude toward active work of all kinds, which I shall touch on later but which may be taken as part of the discipline here as well. "Neither let your motive be the fruit of action, nor let yourself be attached to nonaction," says Krishna.<sup>11</sup> One should remain evenminded in success and in failure, casting off all attachment to their fruits. Those who learn to perform action with evenness of mind, freed from the fetters of rebirth (caused by desire and action with a motive), go beyond relative good and evil and attain liberation from ignorance. In a way, we may see the remainder of the Gita as explaining how we can perfect all these disciplines outlined at the end of chapter 2; for many of the chapters following this one describe in detail the implications of the disciplines we have just considered.

#### WAY OF MENTAL CONCENTRATION

In touching on the way of conscious practice of mental concentration, most to our purpose is chapter 6, "The Way of Meditation," which seems like a commentary on the contemplation spoken of near the end of chapter 2. The aim of this way, as outlined in the Gita, is not so much to encourage intellectual belief in ultimate reality as to help the individual man or woman *experience* the truth of the Self. Here are the most succinctly stated teachings about preparation for mental concentration and conscious practice of it to be found in any scripture of its kind—teachings further spelled out in Patanjali's well-known and far more detailed treatise on control of mind known as the Yoga Sutras.<sup>12</sup> For those who seek practical means to commune with the Transcendental through the intellectual or the devotional path, this chapter can be an extremely useful supplementary guide.

"Let a man be lifted up by his own self; let him not lower himself; for he himself is his friend, and he himself is his enemy," Krishna warns.<sup>13</sup> In these words we hear the voice not of faith but of ripe experience.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 2, 47.

<sup>12</sup> Most of the text of the Yoga Sutras was probably in existence in the second century B.C.

<sup>13</sup> Bhagavad Gita 6, 5.

Effort is called for on the part of the aspirant if divine grace is to find a way to enter his or her life. For those who want to learn meditation, Krishna suggests the following disciplines:<sup>14</sup> One should retire into solitude and live alone, and after having conquered restlessness of mind and body, try always to concentrate the mind on the chosen ideal. The meditation seat should be firm, neither too high nor too low, and should be placed in cleanly surroundings. Sitting in this seat, one should restrain the activities of mind and senses and bring one's thoughts to a point, holding body, neck, and head erect and still, without looking about. Keeping a vow of sexual continence (those involved here are presumably monks), serene of heart and therefore free from fear, and always thinking of the Lord Krishna as ultimate reality, one should practice union with him. One should follow a sort of middle path, being temperate in one's food and recreation, temperate in exertion at work, temperate in sleep and waking.

One's mind, concentrating on the Atman or Self, should be like a "lamp in a windless place," unflickering.<sup>15</sup> When it wanders, one should restore it again and again, undaunted, to the search for the Self. Thus one attains contact with Brahman, which is exceeding bliss. The supreme yogi, says Krishna, is he who, seeing Krishna everywhere and everything in him, "looks on the pleasure and pain of all beings as he looks on them in himself."<sup>16</sup> This verse amounts to the golden rule of Hinduism.

It should be noted that in this sixth chapter the terms Atman or Self, Brahman, and Krishna are used almost interchangeably to refer to the spiritual ideal.

#### WAY OF DEVOTIONAL SELF-GIVING

In chapters 8, 9, and 10, Krishna prepares the devotional aspirant for the revelation of his Universal Form to take place in chapter 11. There, as Swami Nikhilananda has pointed out in his commentary, the warrior Arjuna through the grace of Krishna obtains a staggering, indeed terrifying, vision of the totality of the Godhead. As he puts it, "In an ineffable oneness are revealed all the facets of the Godhead—spirit and matter, being and becoming, infinite and finite, past and future."<sup>17</sup> In wonder the disciple cries out: "Infinite One, Lord of gods, Abode of the universe, thou art the Imperishable, Being and nonbeing, and that which is the Supreme. Thou art the first of gods, the ancient Soul; thou art the Supreme Resting-Place of the universe; thou art the Knower, and that which is to be known, and the Ultimate Goal. And by thee is

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 6, 10-28.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 6, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 6, 32.

<sup>17</sup> Swami Nikhilananda (n. 2 above) 268, commentary on B.G. 11, 48.

the world pervaded, O thou of infinite form."<sup>18</sup> Here is direct evidence to Arjuna of the all-encompassing presence of God, seen by him as the Lord Krishna. But the vision is more than he can bear. We are made to understand that the mystical experience of the Universal Form is not meant for men and women in general. Krishna then shows himself in his usual form, benign and unterrifying. And in the chapters that follow, from 12 onward, the Brahman of the Upanishads is presented as a reality with whom we can have a personal relationship.

The way of devotional self-giving or bhakti-yoga is concerned, like that of intuitive wisdom, with the nature of the Godhead, the soul, and the world, and with the question of how to experience the divine presence. Throughout this scripture diverse suggestions are given about how to approach God. Clearly, he may be approached as a man. "Though I am unborn and eternal, and though I am the Lord of all beings, yet, subjugating my material nature, I accept birth through my maya."<sup>19</sup> Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and a rise of unrighteousness, I incarnate myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of righteousness, I am born in every age."<sup>20</sup> Despite a great deal of misapprehension on the part of both Hindus and Christians about the exact meaning of the others' term "incarnation," I believe that we must grant that in the avatara or "descent" of Vishnu, as seen from the human point of view, there is quite as much of a taking on of human nature as in a soul's being born as a man or woman. The basic difference between the two is that the avatara, unlike the human soul, is not under the control of the human nature, and thus is incapable of sin.

As we have seen, Krishna tells Arjuna that God rewards men in whatever way they approach him. In chapter 8 it is said that the Supreme Person, in whom all beings abide and who pervades the whole universe, may be attained by whole-souled devotion directed to him alone.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, to those who worship him, never harboring any other thought and always devoted to him, the Lord "brings what they need and preserves what they already possess."<sup>22</sup> Even those who, with faith, worship other gods, worship him alone, though in a wrong way<sup>23</sup>—a teaching close to the Christian doctrine of "implicit faith," through

<sup>18</sup> Bhagavad Gita 11, 37-38.

<sup>19</sup> The word "maya" here refers to the Lord's creative power of "veiling" his true nature and "projecting" the multiplicity of the relative world.

<sup>20</sup> Bhagavad Gita 4, 6-8.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 8, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 9, 22. The phrase given in the text as "never harboring any other thought" may also be translated as "meditating on their identity with me." The former is a modal nondualist or dualistic interpretation, the latter a nondualist.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 9, 23.

which the sincere believer in any faith is said to be worshipping the Beloved (that is, Christ) though by another name and without knowing perfectly who he is.

Two of the most telling verses on the devotional approach to God are found in chapter 9: "Whoever offers me, with devotion, a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water—that I accept, the pious offering of the pure in heart. Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give away, and whatever you practice in the form of austerities—do it as an offering to me."<sup>24</sup>

Chapter 12, "The Way of Devotion," deals exclusively with this path. Very explicitly, Krishna suggests disciplines for the devotee or bhakta: he should fix his mind on God alone; if at first he cannot fix his mind on God steadily, he should draw the mind again and again from other objects and try to keep it fixed on him; if he cannot manage that, he should seek to devote himself to service of the Lord (as in chanting the Lord's names and glories, listening to others chanting them, observing fasts and other austerities, or making offerings of food, flowers, and other objects of ritualistic worship). If he is unable to perform even this sort of service, then, taking refuge in the Lord, he should strive to be self-controlled and simply surrender the fruit of each of his actions to him.<sup>25</sup>

Summing up, Krishna says: "He who never hates any being and is friendly and compassionate to all, who is free from the feelings of 'I and 'mine' and even-minded in pain and pleasure, who is forebearing, ever content, and steady in contemplation, who is self-controlled and possessed of firm conviction, and who has consecrated his mind and understanding to me—dear to me is the one who is thus devoted to me."<sup>26</sup> Krishna has already assured Arjuna: "Those who consecrate all their actions to me, regarding me as the Supreme Goal, and who worship me, meditating on me with single-minded concentration—to them, whose minds are thus absorbed in me, verily I become ere long the Savior from the death-fraught ocean of the world."<sup>27</sup>

#### WAY OF SERVICE

The three disciplines we have discussed as means for communing with the Transcendental—intuitive wisdom, mental concentration, and devotion—may be practiced separately or along with one another, depending on the temperament of the individual worshiper. But in the fourth

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 9, 26–27. The word "me" in these two verses refers to Krishna as the Lord.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 12, 8–11.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 12, 13–14.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 12, 6–7. In dealing with devotional self-giving, my interpretation leans to the approach of the modal nondualist Ramanuja; for I consider his interpretation of the Gita texts clearly relating to this path the most faithful.



discipline, service through active work, we find in the Gita a fusion (for the average man or woman) of the paths of jnana and bhakti, in that through karma-yoga the intellectual and emotional disciplines are to be employed harmoniously in the everyday world. (It is possible, of course, for an agnostic or even an atheist to practice karma-yoga, in which case he would work selflessly for the work's sake alone. But in the present context we are speaking of aspirants who believe in a transcendent-immanent reality that overarches and undergirds the physical universe and the individual soul.)

In chapter 2, as we saw, the Gita gives a concise statement of the gist of this yoga. "To action alone are you entitled," says Krishna, "never to its fruit."<sup>28</sup> One is not to be attached to the results of what one does; nor, on the contrary, is one for that reason to give up activity and become inert. But, endowed with evenness of mind, one should cast off in his very life both good deeds *and* bad deeds done with a selfish motive, performing simply whatever duties one's place in life requires one to perform.<sup>29</sup> Here Krishna makes one of his best-known statements: "Karma-yoga is skill in action."<sup>30</sup> And this is what one is asked to strive for. Thus everyday life becomes a challenge and, if the challenge is met, an adventure in fulfillment.

Chapter 3, "The Way of Action," deals specifically with this yoga. This way is not inferior, for the average man or woman, to the way of an all-renouncing monk. "Not by merely abstaining from action does a man reach the state of actionlessness,"<sup>31</sup> Krishna tells Arjuna, "nor by mere renunciation does he arrive at perfection."<sup>32</sup> Everyone is forced to act, in one way or another, because of impulses born of past desires and deeds; and one who restrains the organs of action<sup>33</sup> but continues to dwell on sense objects with the mind is a conscious or unconscious hypocrite.<sup>34</sup> The way to act without being bound is to do work as sacrifice, that is, as worship without selfish desire for gain.<sup>35</sup> The man who does his work as sacrifice, and therefore without attachment, attains the Highest Goal.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 2, 47.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 2, 49-50.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 2, 50.

<sup>31</sup> The "actionlessness" referred to here indicates a state of freedom from egoistic action, not abstention from all activity.

<sup>32</sup> Bhagavad Gita 3, 4.

<sup>33</sup> The "organs of action" are the hands, feet, vocal organ, genitals, and excretory organ.

<sup>34</sup> Bhagavad Gita 3, 5-6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 3, 9. As the commentator Shankara points out, there are various types of sacrifice: sacrifice to the gods, in the form of offerings and ritualistic worship; sacrifice to Brahman, through teaching and reciting scripture; sacrifice for human beings, in feeding the poor and homeless and treating guests as God; sacrifice for creatures, through feeding the lower animals; sacrifice for the ancestors, by making offerings for the peace of their souls. See Swami Nikhilananda, commentary on B.G. 3, 13, p. 100.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 3, 19.

Like the ordinary person, the man of enlightenment, too, performs work, though he has no object to gain from it—just as Krishna himself, Lord of the universe, constantly works.<sup>37</sup> But the ordinary person may determine what is best to do by taking into account his or her own dharma or personal duty, the inner law that shapes the whole character. "Better is one's own dharma, though imperfectly performed," warns Krishna, "than the dharma of another, well performed."<sup>38</sup>

In chapter 4 Krishna once again speaks profound words about the nature and realization of one whose attachment to work is gone. Such a person sees "inaction in action, and action in inaction."<sup>39</sup> Swami Vivekananda, a prophet of modern Hinduism, in his series of lectures entitled "Karma-Yoga," gives what amounts to a commentary on this verse: "The ideal man is he who in the midst of the greatest silence and solitude finds the intensest activity, and in the midst of the intensest activity the silence and solitude of the desert. . . . That is the ideal of karma-yoga, and if you have attained to that, you have really learned the secret of work."<sup>40</sup> For such a person, as the Gita states in one of its most expressive verses, "God is the process of the sacrificial offering, God is the offering itself, and it is God who pours the offering into the sacrificial fire, which also is God. God alone is attained by him who sees God in all action."<sup>41</sup> The implication here is that he sees God *in* everything, and this because he sees that nothing can exist apart from God. Indeed, his day-to-day life itself becomes for him a process of sacrificial offering.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna shows time and again that all the faculties of the human person are to be utilized as means of communing with the Transcendental. The paths of intuitive wisdom and devotional self-giving, though for the contemplative monk they have their own sets of rigorous disciplines, are for the average man or woman matters of faith rather than of direct experience. Through either of them separately, or both of them in concert, with the help of the methods of the path of conscious mental control (which itself may be pursued independently), the mystic arrives at the break-through that gives him an immediate vision of the indivisible Atman-Brahman, ultimate reality as differentiated from the world of becoming. But, as Krishna states clearly in chapter 5 and by implication elsewhere, it is also possible for the average man or woman to reach the goal attained by the truly mature mystic<sup>42</sup>—and that without going through the mystic's heroic

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 3, 20-22.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 3, 35.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 4, 18.

<sup>40</sup> *Vivekananda: The Yogas and Other Works* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1953) 461. Vivekananda was born in 1863 and died in 1902.

<sup>41</sup> Bhagavad Gita 4, 24. The word here translated as "God" is "Brahman" in the original. This verse should not be interpreted as being pantheistic.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 5, 5.

struggle and shattering transegoistic experience.

For the mystic, if he is to be called a mature mystic, must *return* to the "relative world" and realize the transcendental, now and here, in everyday living. If he cannot, he remains an immature mystic—immature in that he cherishes the belief that his own particular vision of God, conditioned in its expression though it must be by his own cultural heritage, alone is true and accurate, and others' vision of him is false, and in addition that the world of becoming is ultimately lacking in substance. This is not a mature view; for what must never be forgotten is that God is not only transcendent but also immanent. True, it is said by Krishna in the Gita: "Whatever glorious or beautiful or mighty being exists anywhere, know that it has sprung from but a spark of my splendor. . . . With a single fragment of myself I support the whole universe."<sup>43</sup> God far transcends the world of his creation. But it is also said: "He who sees the Supreme Lord abiding alike in all beings, and not perishing when they perish—verily, he alone sees."<sup>44</sup> Hence, when we think of this scripture as showing a way to the transcendental, we must remember that the gate at its far end is not a one-way affair. The Transcendental does not merely transcend. Contrary to the popular saying, there *is* a round-trip ticket to nirvana. What is more, most of us have no need of one.

It is *through* the creation that most of us shall eventually see the Lord. The majority of men and women can never expect to experience anything in this life beyond the relative world. But all the statements about action in the Gita indicate that, through work selflessly performed for the sake of the Lord (or even for its own sake), the average man or woman can achieve a realization of ultimate reality, in this life, as immanent in the creation.

To some, such as the late R. C. Zaehner, the Gita's method shows that, in good Christian fashion, Krishna leads us from the "impersonal" to the "personal" view of God, and puts the personal, that is to say, himself as total embodiment of Vishnu, "above" the so-called impersonal Atman-Brahman. This would be a correct assessment if one could be certain that we may look on the Brahman envisioned in chapter 2 as being utterly without attributes rather than merely indescribable. Yet that is to make Brahman something entirely negative—in its own way as much of an object (in being a *denial* of objective qualities) as any anthropomorphic concept of deity. And Krishna, be it noted, always speaks of Brahman as "me." When we come to realize through devoted work of service to God or humanity, or through any other discipline inducing selflessness, that personality is something far more profound and mysterious than the individual uniqueness of the ego-self, we shall

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 10, 41–42.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 13, 27.

perhaps be able to see that the goal reached by the so-called impersonalists and by the so-called personalists—as Ramakrishna untiringly pointed out in the last century from the evidence of his own experience, and as the Gita so often affirms—is one and the same.

And this is what Krishna means when in chapter 18 of the Gita he says: “Abandon all dharmas<sup>45</sup> and come to me alone for shelter. I will deliver you from all sins; do not grieve.”<sup>46</sup> For the “me” he refers to here is simply the Ultimate Person, who is one with what we have been referring to as the Transcendental—just as the “I” is when Jesus Christ says to his questioners: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”<sup>47</sup>

What all this seems to show is that the divine presence can be realized here in the relative world as well as in the world of mystical experience. As it was announced in the Upanishads some centuries earlier: “That [transcendent reality] is full; this [conditioned reality] is full. This fulness has been projected from that fulness.”<sup>48</sup> Hence, for all but perhaps the profound mystic, whatever is not to be realized in sense experience (purified of personal bias) is simply a *form of thought*. Thus, even the terms “transcendent” and “immanent” are meaningless for the person fully awake to the divine presence. Krishna’s final exhortation to his disciple Arjuna to “abandon all dharmas” and come to him alone for shelter is tantamount to saying: “Give up at last all mere duties seen as something of absolute value in themselves, even the specific disciplines of the four yogas, and realize God’s immediate presence within your purified person, in direct experience.”

<sup>45</sup> The word “dharma” may be understood here to imply not only all individual duties or all disciplines of the four ways we have encountered in the Gita, but righteous actions in general performed with a selfish end in view.

<sup>46</sup> Bhagavad Gita 18, 66. The meaning here would appear to be that communion with ultimate reality is not to be won through performance of any sort of duty with the notion that one can oneself attain it through such means. Salvation, or liberation from ignorance, consists in one’s having been emptied of the ego-self and having realized that it is the Transcendental (i.e., the Lord Krishna) who lives in one. The nondualist Shankara’s commentary on this verse (see Swami Nikhilananda 368–69) is usually held to rule out *all* activity as a means to salvation. In this view, it is to be obtained only through Self-knowledge. It appears to some, however, that actions performed without the egoistic notion of being the doer are not here ruled out as a means—so long as one has thrown oneself on the mercy of Krishna and acts in the faith that one is simply an instrument of the Lord. This sort of activity leads to the state of “actionlessness” referred to earlier (B.G. 3, 4; see n. 31 above), which the Gita states is not to be attained by mere abstention from action. A reassessment of the nondualist Shankara’s position in the light of Ramakrishna’s doctrine of the *mature* mystic, experiencing the state beyond ecstasy, is badly needed.

<sup>47</sup> Jn 8:58.

<sup>48</sup> Isha Upanishad, Invocation; Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Invocation; 5, 1, 5.

## SOME CHRISTIAN CONNECTIONS

Before undertaking any study of the Bhagavad Gita, a Christian may justifiably ask to know more about the relationship of its way of approaching the Transcendental to specifically Christian spirituality. This is not the place for a detailed examination of all the similarities and dissimilarities of Hinduism and Christianity. I have already noted, casually, a few parallels in the course of the discussion. But I wish to focus here on specific instances of similarities in practical matters. As for dissimilarities, until we have first understood the meaning of the points where the two religions closely approach each other, we cannot hope to appreciate the meaning of those instances where they diverge. It may not be out of place, however, to mention one that perhaps everyone who reads the Gita will notice. Whereas in Christianity full communion with the Transcendental is believed to be possible only after death, it would appear on the evidence of scripture and saints alike that in Hinduism it is possible in the present life. Yet even here one must guard against the quick assumption that this dissimilarity indicates a contradiction. On further inquiry, one may find that the term connotes in the two contexts not contradictory but complementary dimensions of the spiritual life—the one based on revelation and faith, the other on practice and experience.

Of all the similarities in the practical sphere, surely the most striking parallel between Hinduism and Christianity is to be found in the four ways of communing with the Transcendental that we have been considering. For whatever we may understand that term to convey, each of the ways forms a strand not only in the Hindu but also in the Christian spiritual fabric. It is true that in India, in the centuries following the third century B.C., the four ways became far more specialized than in the Gita, where they are harmonized by Krishna himself into a unity much as they are in Christianity. But this fact, though apparently an occasion of difference, in actuality enables a Christian aspirant to appreciate the qualities of the various strands of the Christian fabric more intelligently.<sup>49</sup> Again, in individual Hindu saints' lives there has

<sup>49</sup> For an interpretation of the way of intuitive wisdom as a separate way, Shankara's approach is perhaps the most representative; Ramanuja and Madhva both interpret the way of devotional self-giving authoritatively, the former with a modal nondualist slant, the latter with a purely dualist. For a classic interpretation of the way of mental control, the Western student may best consult Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. The only thorough presentation of the way of service outside the Gita is to be found in Swami Vivekananda's Karma-Yoga, which is included in *Vivekananda: The Yogas and Other Works* (see n. 40 above) along with popularized versions of the other three ways. Though the Gita, as is now thought, may be placed at about 250 B.C., perhaps there were already differentiations of the four ways almost as distinct as those that occurred later; else why should Krishna be seeking to integrate them? It is possible also that the only one thus

often been an interweaving of two or more of these strands. Yet it is in the nineteenth century that one finds the ideal of the Gita *fully* realized — in the life and teaching of the saint Ramakrishna.

In the light of our previous discussion of the four ways as found in the Gita, where are their counterparts to be identified in the Christian tradition? The answer to this question is that all four ways are either hinted at or clearly represented in the sayings of Jesus and the apostles, and later in the writings of the outstanding mystics and thinkers of the Church. The way of intuitive wisdom, for example, which represents an intellectual search eventually yielding intuitive apprehension of ultimate reality, in its Christian formulation bears witness to the one nature of God, to his indivisible unity (or, as Hindus would say, non-duality), and to his dwelling in the depths of the human soul as the "true light" that enlightens every man and woman.<sup>50</sup> In some of the statements of St. Paul and St. John, as well as of mystics like Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, St. Catherine of Genoa, and St. John of the Cross, to mention but a few, it speaks of a relationship of the soul to God so intimate as to make it seem — as in the Hindu nondualist schools — all but indistinguishable or indeed essentially indistinguishable from him. The Old Testament revelation "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,'"<sup>51</sup> and Jesus' declaration "I and the Father are one,"<sup>52</sup> both point in this same direction.

The way of mental concentration, which in its Hindu version aims at helping the individual through conscious control of mind to experience the truth of the Self, is seldom as explicitly spelled out in Christian teaching as in Hindu. Yet it is implicit in the teaching of Jesus that "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit."<sup>53</sup> And its message that that "death," that emptying of self-will, is impossible without rigorous spiritual discipline, is echoed not only in St. Paul's "I have been crucified with Christ,"<sup>54</sup> but in the writings of St. John of the Cross, St. Ignatius Loyola, and St. Francis de Sales, and in manuals of spiritual practice by later spiritual directors.

Again, the way of devotional self-giving concerns itself with the nature of God as person, with the soul's relation to him, and with how the soul may experience the divine presence by making use of its

---

differentiated was the way of mental control, and that Krishna, like Christians from the time of the apostles onward, merely saw the others as harmonious strands of one already complete sanatana dharma or "eternal religion." See nn, 7, 8, and 9 above, for the first three theologians mentioned.

<sup>50</sup> Jn 1:9.

<sup>53</sup> Jn 12:24.

<sup>51</sup> Gen 1:26.

<sup>54</sup> Gal 2:20.

<sup>52</sup> Jn 10:30.

capacity for emotion. Its Christian expression bears witness to the three Persons of the Godhead, to God's love for the human soul as its Creator, a love so perfect that he sent his only Son that men and women might inherit eternal life, and to the obligation of his children to love one another. One of its clearest expressions is found, of course, in Jesus' command "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love."<sup>55</sup> But since it forms, along with the way of service, the very basis of practical Christianity, the devotional way may be identified in the sayings of the apostles and the writings of all the Church Fathers and saints and spiritual guides who followed them.

Finally, the way of service teaches the active person that it is his right only to perform his work well, serving the Lord through his fellow humans, and to expect no reward for what he does. In Christian tradition, as the means by which Jesus' command to love one's neighbor is put into practice, it permeates the entire teaching of the Church outside the sphere of mysticism (where, however, it may be presumed that the striving of contemplatives is also to be carried out without selfish aim). Quite as explicitly as ever in the Gita, Jesus himself laid out the basic requirements for faithful following of this way. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren," he told his followers, "you did it to me."<sup>56</sup> And "When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing."<sup>57</sup>

It is clear, I think, from these examples (which could be indefinitely multiplied) that a real relationship exists between the Hindu and Christian ways of approaching the Transcendental. The Bhagavad Gita as a practical guide would thus seem to have a special importance for Christians as a means of helping them appreciate in greater depth the implications of what their own best mentors have been trying to tell them. Insofar as its disciplines do not conflict with the best disciplines of Christianity, perhaps it would seem not of great importance to try to find out what is the authority responsible for them. And yet, if we could finally determine that one and the same inspiration is speaking through all of them, the task of those entrusted with carrying on a conversation with other religions would be immensely lightened. This is not a hopeless undertaking; for, as we recall, the aspect of experience through spiritual practice is not the only aspect of religion. There is also the aspect of revelation itself. And the Bhagavad Gita as a scripture, as a true document of the human spirit, derives its importance from more than the similarities it bears to Christian doctrine in the matter of ways to commune with the Transcendental.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the Gita as revelation;

<sup>55</sup> Jn 15:9.

<sup>57</sup> Mt 6:3.

<sup>56</sup> Mt 25:40.

for that purpose we should have to study in detail the nature of the Lord Krishna as there revealed. Suffice it to say that if Krishna is understood, as the Gita understands him, as the mystery at the heart of the universe, the ultimate basis of matter and of the ever-creative law of cause and effect, and at the same time as the mystery at the heart of the human person, source of the never-ceasing flow of thought and feeling, the Gita may one day be seen as more than a way-shower to the Transcendental. It may be seen as well as a revealing by the Word who was from the beginning of another dimension of the divine, a dimension complementary to that revealed in the New Testament. For it involves, beyond the four ways to commune with the Transcendental that it sets forth, a witnessing<sup>58</sup> to the sacramental nature of the physical and psychological universes, of this whole world of becoming in which all of us, whether we know it or not, are making our way to the transforming vision of a God who lives with us—beyond the transcendent and the immanent—now and here.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Bhagavad Gita 3, 22-24; 4, 6-8; 7, 4-12, 24-26; 9, 4-10, 17-18; 10, 8, 20, 42; 13, 12-17; 14, 26-27.