

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2023, Term II.2

Opening Comments

Krishna's identity is one of the ongoing mysteries of the *Bhagavad Gita*. We are initially introduced to him as the cousin of Arjuna who is also his personal charioteer. However, when Arjuna sinks into the chariot in despair, refusing to fight, Krishna becomes Arjuna's sage, and Arjuna becomes his disciple, sitting at his feet for instruction the way students do in the *Upanishads*. And the various kinds of advice that Krishna gives to him, having to do with the eternal Self, Dharma, and Sankhya philosophy, all echo the wisdom that would be given to a disciple by his sage.

However, in the reading for last week, there are signs that Krishna is more than a cousin, charioteer, or even sage. When Arjuna asks Krishna to describe the lives of those who live in wisdom, Krishna says, "2.61 They live in wisdom who subdue their senses and keep their minds ever absorbed in me." Even more provocatively, when Krishna is teaching Arjuna about action freed from attachment to its results, he uses his own cosmic action as the primary example to be emulated. "3.22 There is nothing in the three worlds for me to gain, Arjuna, nor is there anything I do not have; I continue to act, but I am not driven by any need of my own. 23 If I ever refrained from continuous work, everyone would immediately follow my example. 24 If I stopped working I would be the cause of cosmic chaos, and finally of the destruction of this world and these people."

The reading for this evening reveals even more about Krishna, building on what we have been told in Chapter 3 about the way Krishna wards off chaos. When Arjuna asks Krishna how he could say that he had taught the path of yoga to their ancestors, Krishna tells him: "4.6 My true being is unborn and changeless. I am the Lord who dwells in every creature. Through the power of my own *maya*, I manifest myself in a finite form." This means that Krishna only appears to be his cousin and charioteer, but this is a manifestation of the Lord who dwells in every creature. Krishna is an avatar of ultimate reality, but unlike the Christian understanding of the incarnation, Krishna can manifest himself in any age, through multiple rebirths. "4.5 You and I have passed through many births, Arjuna. You have forgotten, but I remember them all." However, the manifestation of Krishna is always in response to the threat to dharma by chaos, as we saw in Arjuna's long lament about the destructiveness of waging a war against one's own kin. "4.7 Whenever *dharma* declines and the purpose of life is forgotten, I manifest myself on earth. 8 I am born in every age to protect the good, to destroy evil, and to reestablish *dharma*." Moreover, Krishna does not only teach Arjuna about the eternal Atman or Self, which Arjuna should realize, but declares that he is himself the Atman, the Self in all things. "4. 9 Those who know me as their own divine Self break through the belief that they are the body and are not reborn as separate creatures. Such a one, Arjuna, is united with me. 10 Delivered from selfish attachment, fear, and anger, filled with me, surrendering themselves to me, purified in the fire of my being, many have reached the

state of unity in me. 11 As they approach me, so I receive them.” And he concludes this speech by making one of the most distinctive claims in the *Gita*: “All paths, Arjuna, lead to me.” The reading for tonight will go on to detail the various paths to liberation that can be taken—the path of selfless service, the path of meditation, the path of wisdom and knowledge, the path of renunciation—but Krishna assures Arjuna before he gets to any of them that they all lead to him.

What, then, is the relationship between Krishna and the other terms signifying ultimate reality that we have seen thus far in the *Gita*—I.e., the Lord, the Self, Brahman? There is one paragraph in tonight’s reading that is especially dizzying with regard to this question. In chapter five, speaking about the way both renunciation and action lead to Brahman, or ultimate reality, Krishna says:

15 **The Lord** does not partake in the good and evil deeds of any person; judgment is clouded when wisdom is obscured by ignorance. 16 But ignorance is destroyed by knowledge of **the Self** within. The light of this knowledge shines like the sun, revealing **the supreme Brahman**. 17 Those who cast off sin through this knowledge, absorbed in **the Lord** and established in him as their one goal and refuge, are not reborn as separate creatures. 18 Those who possess this wisdom have equal regard for all. They see **the same Self** in a spiritual aspirant and an outcaste, in an elephant, a cow, and a dog. 19 Such people have mastered life. With even mind **they rest in Brahman**, who is perfect and is everywhere the same. 20 They are not elated by good fortune nor depressed by bad. With mind established **in Brahman**, they are free from delusion.

Here it seems that the Lord is one with the Self, or Atman; and the Lord is one with Brahman. The goal would be to surrender to Brahman to become free from sin, as in this beautiful passage from the same chapter: “5.10 Those who surrender to Brahman all selfish attachments are like the leaf of a lotus floating clean and dry in water. Sin cannot touch them.” Krishna makes the same claim with regard to being united with the Self, or the Atman: “6.18 Through constant effort they learn to withdraw the mind from selfish cravings and absorb it in the Self. Thus they attain the state of union. 19 When meditation is mastered, the mind is unwavering like the flame of a lamp in a windless place. 20 In the still mind, in the depths of meditation, the Self reveals itself. Beholding the Self by means of the Self, an aspirant knows the joy and peace of complete fulfillment.” However, earlier when Krishna describes the practice of meditation, he equates the Self and Brahman with himself: “6.14 With all fears dissolved in the peace of the Self and all desires dedicated to Brahman, controlling the mind and fixing it on me, sit in meditation with me as your only goal. 15 With senses and mind constantly controlled through meditation, united with the Self within, an aspirant attains *nirvana*, the state of abiding joy and peace in me.” This is reinforced later in this chapter when Krishna speaks of the joy of being united with Brahman:

28 The infinite joy of touching Brahman is easily attained by those who are free from the burden of evil and established within themselves. 29 They see the Self in every creature and all creation in the Self. With consciousness unified through meditation, they see everything with an equal eye. 30 I am ever present to those who have realized me in every creature. Seeing all life as my manifestation, they are never separated from me. 31 They worship me in the hearts of all, and all their actions proceed from me. Wherever they may live, they abide in me.

The clear implication is that the Lord is the Self, the Self is Brahman, and Brahman is Krishna. For the text is clear that ultimate reality is one, as opposed to the dualities of the senses. But this leaves us with the question, if this is the case, then why are so many terms used to name the one ultimate reality?

The other question raised by the readings for this evening has to do with the status of the different paths of liberation that Krishna lays out for Arjuna. Is the best path acting without attachment to the results, which is the way that Krishna acts? Or is the best path the way of knowledge and wisdom, that burns to ashes all karma? Or is the best path the way of renunciation via meditation, which is the path of yoga, the path of stillness and peace? Or are each of these paths the best path, depending on where we are in our spiritual development, since Krishna assures Arjuna, “All paths, Arjuna, lead to me”? If so, what is distinct about each path, and what do all of these paths have in common, if anything? But this is a question that I think would be better addressed in our discussion, as we puzzle through the readings together.