

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term 1

Reading I.3

The Bhagavad Gita 1: The War Within

DHRITARASHTRA

1 O Sanjaya, tell me what happened at Kurukshetra, the field of *dharma*, where my family and the Pandavas gathered to fight.

SANJAYA

2 Having surveyed the forces of the Pandavas arrayed for battle, prince Duryodhana approached his teacher, Drona, and spoke.

3 “O my teacher, look at this mighty army of the Pandavas, assembled by your own gifted disciple, Yudhishtira. 4 There are heroic warriors and great archers who are the equals of Bhima and Arjuna: Yuyudhana, Virata, the mighty Drupada, 5 Dhrishtaketu, Chekitana, the valiant king of Kashi, Purujit, Kuntibhoja, the great leader Shaibya, 6 the powerful Yudhamanyu, the valiant Uttamaujas, and the son of Subhadra, in addition to the sons of Draupadi. All these command mighty chariots.

7 “O best of brahmins, listen to the names of those who are distinguished among our own forces: 8 Bhishma, Karna, and the victorious Kripa; Ashvatthama, Vikarna, and the son of Somadatta.

9 “There are many others, too, heroes giving up their lives for my sake, all proficient in war and armed with a variety of weapons. 10 Our army is unlimited and commanded by Bhishma; theirs is small and commanded by Bhima. 11 Let everyone take his proper place and stand firm supporting Bhishma!”

12 Then the powerful Bhishma, the grandsire, oldest of all the Kurus, in order to cheer Duryodhana, roared like a lion and blew his conch horn. 13 And after Bhishma, a tremendous noise arose of conchs and cow horns and pounding on drums.

14 Then Sri Krishna and Arjuna, who were standing in a mighty chariot yoked with white horses, blew their divine conchs. 15 Sri Krishna blew the conch named Panchajanya, and Arjuna blew that called Devadatta. The mighty Bhima blew the huge conch Paundra. 16 Yudhishtira, the king, the son of Kunti, blew the conch Anantavijaya; Nakula and Sahadeva blew their conchs as well. 17 Then the king of Kashi, the leading bowman, the great warrior Shikhandi, Dhrishtadyumna, Virata, the invincible Satyaki, 18 Drupada, all the sons of Draupadi, and the strong-armed son of Subhadra joined in, 19 and the noise tore through the heart of Duryodhana’s army. Indeed, the sound was tumultuous, echoing

throughout heaven and earth. 20 Then, O Dhritarashtra, lord of the earth, having seen your son's forces set in their places and the fighting about to begin, Arjuna spoke these words to Sri Krishna:

ARJUNA

21 O Krishna, drive my chariot between the two armies. 22 I want to see those who desire to fight with me. With whom will this battle be fought? 23 I want to see those assembled to fight for Duryodhana, those who seek to please the evil-minded son of Dhritarashtra by engaging in war.

SANJAYA

24 Thus Arjuna spoke, and Sri Krishna, driving his splendid chariot between the two armies, 25 facing Bhishma and Drona and all the kings of the earth, said: "Arjuna, behold all the Kurus gathered together."

26 And Arjuna, standing between the two armies, saw fathers and grandfathers, teachers, uncles, and brothers, sons and grandsons, 27 in-laws and friends. Seeing his kinsmen established in opposition, 28 Arjuna was overcome by sorrow. Despairing, he spoke these words:

ARJUNA

O Krishna, I see my own relations here anxious to fight, 29 and my limbs grow weak; my mouth is dry, my body shakes, and my hair is standing on end. 30 My skin burns, and the bow Gandiva has slipped from my hand. I am unable to stand; my mind seems to be whirling. 31 These signs bode evil for us. I do not see that any good can come from killing our relations in battle. 32 O Krishna, I have no desire for victory, or for a kingdom or pleasures. Of what use is a kingdom or pleasure or even life, 33 if those for whose sake we desire these things – 34 teachers, fathers, sons, grandfathers, uncles, in-laws, grandsons, and others with family ties – are engaging in this battle, renouncing their wealth and their lives? 35 Even if they were to kill me, I would not want to kill them, not even to become ruler of the three worlds. How much less for the earth alone? 36 O Krishna, what satisfaction could we find in killing Dhritarashtra's sons? We would become sinners by slaying these men, even though they are evil. 37 The sons of Dhritarashtra are related to us; therefore, we should not kill them. How can we gain happiness by killing members of our own family? 38 Though they are overpowered by greed and see no evil in destroying families or injuring friends, we see these evils.

39 Why shouldn't we turn away from this sin? 40 When a family declines, ancient traditions are destroyed. With them are lost the spiritual foundations for life, and the family loses its sense of unity. 41 Where there is no sense of unity, the women of the family become corrupt; and with the corruption of its women, society is plunged into chaos. 42 Social chaos is hell for the family and for those who have destroyed the family as well. It disrupts the process of spiritual evolution begun by our ancestors. 43 The timeless spiritual foundations of family and society would be destroyed by these terrible deeds, which violate the unity of life. 44 It is said that those whose family *dharma* has been destroyed dwell in hell. 45 This is a great sin! We are prepared to kill our own relations out of greed for the pleasures of a kingdom. 46 Better for me if the sons of Dhritarashtra, weapons in hand, were to attack me in battle and kill me unarmed and unresisting.

SANJAYA

47 Overwhelmed by sorrow, Arjuna spoke these words. And casting away his bow and his arrows, he sat down in his chariot in the middle of the battlefield.

2: Self-Realization

SANJAYA

1 These are the words that Sri Krishna spoke to the despairing Arjuna, whose eyes were burning with tears of pity and confusion.

KRISHNA

2 This despair and weakness in a time of crisis are mean and unworthy of you, Arjuna. How have you fallen into a state so far from the path to liberation? 3 It does not become you to yield to this weakness. Arise with a brave heart and destroy the enemy.

ARJUNA

4 How can I ever bring myself to fight against Bhishma and Drona, who are worthy of reverence? How can I, Krishna? 5 Surely it would be better to spend my life begging than to kill these great and worthy souls! If I killed them, every pleasure I found would be tainted. 6 I don't even know which would be better, for us to conquer them or for them to conquer us. The sons of Dhritarashtra have confronted us; but why would we care to live if we killed them? 7 My will is paralyzed, and I am utterly confused. Tell me which is the better path for me. Let me be your disciple. I have fallen at your feet; give me instruction. 8 What can overcome a sorrow that saps all my vitality? Even power over men and gods or the wealth of an empire seem empty.

SANJAYA

9 This is how Arjuna, the great warrior, spoke to Sri Krishna. With the words, "O Krishna, I will not fight," he fell silent. 10 As they stood between the two armies, Sri Krishna smiled and replied to Arjuna, who had sunk into despair.

KRISHNA

11 You speak sincerely, but your sorrow has no cause. The wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead. 12 There has never been a time when you and I and the kings gathered here have not existed, nor will there be a time when we will cease to exist. 13 As the same person inhabits the body through childhood, youth, and old age, so too at the time of death he attains another body. The wise are not deluded by these changes. 14 When the senses contact sense objects, a person experiences cold or heat, pleasure or pain. These experiences are fleeting; they come and go. Bear them patiently, Arjuna. 15 Those who are unaffected by these changes, who are the same in pleasure and pain, are truly wise and fit for immortality. Assert your strength and realize this! 16 The impermanent has no reality; reality lies in the eternal. Those who have seen the boundary between these two have attained the end of all

knowledge. 17 Realize that which pervades the universe and is indestructible; no power can affect this unchanging, imperishable reality. 18 The body is mortal, but that which dwells in the body is immortal and immeasurable. Therefore, Arjuna, fight in this battle. 19 One believes he is the slayer, another believes he is the slain. Both are ignorant; there is neither slayer nor slain. 20 You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed; you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies. 21 Realizing that which is indestructible, eternal, unborn, and unchanging, how can you slay or cause another to slay? 22 As one abandons worn-out clothes and acquires new ones, so when the body is worn out a new one is acquired by the Self, who lives within.

23 The Self cannot be pierced by weapons or burned by fire; water cannot wet it, nor can the wind dry it. 24 The Self cannot be pierced or burned, made wet or dry. It is everlasting and infinite, standing on the motionless foundations of eternity. 25 The Self is unmanifested, beyond all thought, beyond all change. Knowing this, you should not grieve. 26 O mighty Arjuna, even if you believe the Self to be subject to birth and death, you should not grieve. 27 Death is inevitable for the living; birth is inevitable for the dead. Since these are unavoidable, you should not sorrow. 28 Every creature is unmanifested at first and then attains manifestation. When its end has come, it once again becomes unmanifested. What is there to lament in this? 29 The glory of the Self is beheld by a few, and a few describe it; a few listen, but many without understanding. 30 The Self of all beings, living within the body, is eternal and cannot be harmed. Therefore, do not grieve.

31 Considering your *dharma*, you should not vacillate. For a warrior, nothing is higher than a war against evil. 32 The warrior confronted with such a war should be pleased, Arjuna, for it comes as an open gate to heaven. 33 But if you do not participate in this battle against evil, you will incur sin, violating your *dharma* and your honor. 34 The story of your dishonor will be repeated endlessly: and for a man of honor, dishonor is worse than death. 35 These brave warriors will think you have withdrawn from battle out of fear, and those who formerly esteemed you will treat you with disrespect. 36 Your enemies will ridicule your strength and say things that should not be said. What could be more painful than this? 37 Death means the attainment of heaven; victory means the enjoyment of the earth. Therefore rise up, Arjuna, resolved to fight! 38 Having made yourself alike in pain and pleasure, profit and loss, victory and defeat, engage in this great battle and you will be freed from sin.

39 You have heard the intellectual explanation of Sankhya, Arjuna; now listen to the principles of *yoga*. By practicing these you can break through the bonds of *karma*. 40 On this path effort never goes to waste, and there is no failure. Even a little effort toward spiritual awareness will protect you from the greatest fear. 41 Those who follow this path, resolving deep within themselves to seek me alone, attain singleness of purpose. For those who lack resolution, the decisions of life are many-branched and endless. 42 There are ignorant people who speak flowery words and take delight in the letter of the law, saying that there is nothing else. 43 Their hearts are full of selfish desires, Arjuna. Their idea of heaven is their own enjoyment, and the aim of all their activities is pleasure and power. The fruit of their actions is continual rebirth.

44 Those whose minds are swept away by the pursuit of pleasure and power are incapable of following the supreme goal and will not attain *samadhi*. 45 The scriptures describe the three *gunas*. But you should be free from the action of the *gunas*, established in eternal truth, self-controlled, without any sense of duality or the desire to acquire and hoard. 46 Just as a reservoir is of little use when the whole

countryside is flooded, scriptures are of little use to the illumined man or woman, who sees the Lord everywhere. 47 You have the right to work, but never to the fruit of work. You should never engage in action for the sake of reward, nor should you long for inaction. 48 Perform work in this world, Arjuna, as a man established within himself – without selfish attachments, and alike in success and defeat. For *yoga* is perfect evenness of mind.

49 Seek refuge in the attitude of detachment and you will amass the wealth of spiritual awareness. Those who are motivated only by desire for the fruits of action are miserable, for they are constantly anxious about the results of what they do. 50 When consciousness is unified, however, all vain anxiety is left behind. There is no cause for worry, whether things go well or ill. Therefore, devote yourself to the disciplines of *yoga*, for *yoga* is skill in action. 51 The wise unify their consciousness and abandon attachment to the fruits of action, which binds a person to continual rebirth. Thus they attain a state beyond all evil. 52 When your mind has overcome the confusion of duality, you will attain the state of holy indifference to things you hear and things you have heard. 53 When you are unmoved by the confusion of ideas and your mind is completely united in deep *samadhi*, you will attain the state of perfect *yoga*.

ARJUNA

54 Tell me of those who live established in wisdom, ever aware of the Self, O Krishna. How do they talk? How sit? How move about?

KRISHNA

55 They live in wisdom who see themselves in all and all in them, who have renounced every selfish desire and sense craving tormenting the heart. 56 Neither agitated by grief nor hankering after pleasure, they live free from lust and fear and anger. Established in meditation, they are truly wise. 57 Fettered no more by selfish attachments, they are neither elated by good fortune nor depressed by bad. Such are the seers. 58 Even as a tortoise draws in its limbs, the wise can draw in their senses at will. 59 Aspirants abstain from sense pleasures, but they still crave for them. These cravings all disappear when they see the highest goal. 60 Even of those who tread the path, the stormy senses can sweep off the mind. 61 They live in wisdom who subdue their senses and keep their minds ever absorbed in me.

62 When you keep thinking about sense objects, attachment comes. Attachment breeds desire, the lust of possession that burns to anger. 63 Anger clouds the judgment; you can no longer learn from past mistakes. Lost is the power to choose between what is wise and what is unwise, and your life is utter waste. 64 But when you move amidst the world of sense, free from attachment and aversion alike, 65 there comes the peace in which all sorrows end, and you live in the wisdom of the Self. 66 The disunited mind is far from wise; how can it meditate? How be at peace? When you know no peace, how can you know joy? 67 When you let your mind follow the call of the senses, they carry away your better judgment as storms drive a boat off its charted course on the sea.

68 Use all your power to free the senses from attachment and aversion alike, and live in the full wisdom of the Self. 69 Such a sage awakes to light in the night of all creatures. That which the world calls day is the night of ignorance to the wise. 70 As rivers flow into the ocean but cannot make the vast ocean overflow, so flow the streams of the sense-world into the sea of peace that is the sage. But this is not so

with the desirer of desires. 71 They are forever free who renounce all selfish desires and break away from the ego-cage of “I,” “me,” and “mine” to be united with the Lord. 72 This is the supreme state. Attain to this, and pass from death to immortality.

3: Selfless Service

ARJUNA

1 O Krishna, you have said that knowledge is greater than action; why then do you ask me to wage this terrible war? 2 Your advice seems inconsistent. Give me one path to follow to the supreme good.

KRISHNA

3 At the beginning of time I declared two paths for the pure heart: *jnana yoga*, the contemplative path of spiritual wisdom, and *karma yoga*, the active path of selfless service. 4 One who shirks action does not attain freedom; no one can gain perfection by abstaining from work. 5 Indeed, there is no one who rests for even an instant; all creatures are driven to action by their own nature. 6 Those who abstain from action while allowing the mind to dwell on sensual pleasure cannot be called sincere spiritual aspirants. 7 But they excel who control their senses through the mind, using them for selfless service. 8 Fulfill all your duties; action is better than inaction. Even to maintain your body, Arjuna, you are obliged to act. 9 Selfish action imprisons the world. Act selflessly, without any thought of personal profit.

10 At the beginning, mankind and the obligation of selfless service were created together. “Through selfless service, you will always be fruitful and find the fulfillment of your desires”: this is the promise of the Creator. 11 Honor and cherish the *devas* as they honor and cherish you; through this honor and love you will attain the supreme good. 12 All human desires are fulfilled by the *devas*, who are pleased by selfless service. But anyone who enjoys the things given by the *devas* without offering selfless acts in return is a thief.

13 The spiritually minded, who eat in the spirit of service, are freed from all their sins; but the selfish, who prepare food for their own satisfaction, eat sin. 14 Living creatures are nourished by food, and food is nourished by rain; rain itself is the water of life, which comes from selfless worship and service. 15 Every selfless act, Arjuna, is born from Brahman, the eternal, infinite Godhead. Brahman is present in every act of service. 16 All life turns on this law, O Arjuna. Those who violate it, indulging the senses for their own pleasure and ignoring the needs of others, have wasted their life. 17 But those who realize the Self are always satisfied. Having found the source of joy and fulfillment, they no longer seek happiness from the external world.

18 They have nothing to gain or lose by any action; neither people nor things can affect their security. 19 Strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world; by devotion to selfless work one attains the supreme goal of life. 20 Do your work with the welfare of others always in mind. It was by such work that Janaka attained perfection; others too have followed this path. 21 What the outstanding person does, others will try to do. The standards such people create will be followed by the whole world. 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. 25 The ignorant work for their own profit, Arjuna; the wise work for the welfare of the world, without thought for themselves. 26 By abstaining from work you will confuse the ignorant, who are engrossed in their actions. Perform all work carefully, guided by compassion.

27 All actions are performed by the *gunas* of *prakriti*. Deluded by identification with the ego, a person thinks, “I am the doer.” 28 But the illumined man or woman understands the domain of the *gunas* and is not attached. Such people know that the *gunas* interact with each other; they do not claim to be the doer. 29 Those who are deluded by the operation of the *gunas* become attached to the results of their action. Those who understand these truths should not unsettle the ignorant.

30 Performing all actions for my sake, completely absorbed in the Self, and without expectations, fight! – but stay free from the fever of the ego. 31 Those who live in accordance with these divine laws without complaining, firmly established in faith, are released from *karma*. 32 Those who violate these laws, criticizing and complaining, are utterly deluded, and are the cause of their own suffering.

33 Even the wise act within the limitations of their own nature. Every creature is subject to *prakriti*; what is the use of repression? 34 The senses have been conditioned by attraction to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant. Do not be ruled by them; they are obstacles in your path. 35 It is better to strive in one’s own *dharma* than to succeed in the *dharma* of another. Nothing is ever lost in following one’s own *dharma*, but competition in another’s *dharma* breeds fear and insecurity.

ARJUNA

36 What is the force that binds us to selfish deeds, O Krishna? What power moves us, even against our will, as if forcing us?

KRISHNA

37 It is selfish desire and anger, arising from the *guna* of *rajas*; these are the appetites and evils which threaten a person in this life. 38 Just as a fire is covered by smoke and a mirror is obscured by dust, just as the embryo rests deep within the womb, knowledge is hidden by selfish desire – 39 hidden, Arjuna, by this unquenchable fire for self-satisfaction, the inveterate enemy of the wise. 40 Selfish desire is found in the senses, mind, and intellect, misleading them and burying the understanding in delusion.

41 Fight with all your strength, Arjuna! Controlling your senses, conquer your enemy, the destroyer of knowledge and realization. 42 The senses are higher than the body, the mind higher than the senses; above the mind is the intellect, and above the intellect is the *Atman*. 43 Thus, knowing that which is supreme, let the *Atman* rule the ego. Use your mighty arms to slay the fierce enemy that is selfish desire.