

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term I.3

Opening Comments

The *Bhagavad Gita* is found within the much larger epic, the *Mahabharata*, which was composed between 400 BCE and 200 CE. The context is a battle that is about to take place between two estranged parts of one larger family. The narrator of the *Gita* is Sanjaya, who is asked by Dhriarashtra to tell him what happened at Kurukshetra, which is also called the field of *dharma*. However, the narration quickly turns to the crisis that confronts Arjuna, who is a highly skilled warrior, and the ways that his charioteer Sri Krishna attempts to resolve that crisis for him. Right away, this leads to at least two ways of reading the *Gita*—one as taking place in a field of battle that will resume once Arjuna overcomes his moral and spiritual crisis, and the other that the *Gita* turns the battle into a metaphor for the spiritual transformation that Arjuna must undergo against his real enemies, namely, his selfish desires. It is also possible that both interpretations are correct—that the way Arjuna can actually fight and win the battle against his kinsmen is to win the battle against ignorance and selfishness within himself.

The opening line of the *Gita* is highly suggestive, however, when it asks what happened on the field of *dharma*. *Dharma* is an enormously significant word for both the Hindu and the Buddhist traditions. It comes from the Sanskrit root which means “to support, maintain or hold.” My teacher John Ross Carter used to say that *dharma* sustains or upholds, and would form his hand into a lotus blossom. The Hindu tradition most often calls itself “eternal *dharma*,” indicating that *dharma* lies at the foundation of Hindu thought and life. The term occurs in the Vedas, which are the most authoritative writings in the Hindu tradition, beginning with the Rig Veda and going on through the Upanishads. The sacrifices described in the Vedas, and spiritually interpreted in the Upanishads, uphold the cosmic, social, and personal order, and prevent chaos from breaking out. And this reveals that there are three fundamental kinds of *dharma*. There is the eternal and universal *dharma*, which orders the universe and keeps it from dissolving into chaos. There is social *dharma*, which includes the caste system that structures family life, and into which one is born. And there is personal *dharma*, which has to do with the right order of one’s own individual life in the context of social and eternal *dharma*. As you may know, there are four castes in Hindu *dharma*: *Brahmins* or priests and scholars; *Kshatriyas*, or warriors and rulers; *Vaishyas*, or traders and landowners; and *Sudras*, who are servants. Those not born into any caste are untouchables, who are now called *Dalit*, who did the least dignified services for society.

The crisis that confronts Arjuna has to do with an apparent conflict between the eternal *dharma*, which prohibits killing one’s kin, and his *dharma* as a *Kshatriya*, which obliges him to fight as a skilled warrior.

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.

This radical violation of social *dharma* would introduce chaos into both family and society, and would therefore appear to violate the social *dharma* of the family.

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. 44 It is said that those whose family *dharma* has been destroyed dwell in hell.

As we can see, the violation of *dharma*, which is what the *Gita* would mean by sin, brings chaos into the family and into the world, undoing the order maintained by *dharma*. Arjuna appeals to Krishna to help him overcome his sense that fighting this battle would have disastrous consequences for the *dharma* of his family, and for the wider community.

The key transition in the *Gita* takes place at the beginning of the second chapter. Arjuna has fallen into a state of despair, and cannot resolve the conflict he is experiencing. Hence he places himself at the feet of Krishna, offering himself to Krishna as his disciple. This is the same posture described in each of the Upanishads, and from this section on the *Gita* takes on the sound and form of an Upanishad itself. In his second reply to Arjuna, Krishna makes an explicit appeal to Arjuna's *dharma* as a member of the warrior caste.

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.

This means that Krishna thinks that Arjuna is wrong in saying that killing his evil kinsmen is a sin. It is his duty as a warrior to go to war against, and to defeat, evil. Indeed, at the conclusion of our reading tonight, Krishna tells Arjuna that he must remain true to his *dharma*, and not try to adopt the *dharma* of another in order to avoid committing what Arjuna thinks is a terrible sin.

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.

"One's own *dharma*" is even more personal than eternal or everyday *dharma*, and has to do with the specific duties that Arjuna must obey, in order to uphold the order of his own life, his family's life, and the order of society.

In his first reply to Arjuna, Krishna sounds like the Upanishads, especially the Katha Upanishad, which he appears to be quoting. In light of Arjuna's horror and grief at the thought of killing his teachers and kinsmen, Krishna reveals the truth about the Atman, the Self. The Self is the eternal, unchanging reality within all reality—the human body, the bodies of animals, the sun, the stars, the universe. As such, the Self cannot be born and it cannot be killed or die. Our senses and our minds tell us that we are an ego attached to this particular body, which is born and which dies, but Krishna tells Arjuna that this is a

delusion that is seen through by the wise. The wise ignore their senses, with their dichotomy of pleasure and pain, and so are unaffected by all the changes that happen to their bodies and their senses.

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! 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. The Self is what unites all apparently separate existences, and it alone abides under all of the changes that we see. When the body dies, the Self attains another body, according to the *karma* of the person's previous life. But the Self cannot die. However, rather strikingly, Krishna does not conclude from this that Arjuna should live in harmony with all, since all are one in the Atman or Self. Rather, he uses this wisdom to give Arjuna the ability to kill his evil kinsmen in battle.

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. 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. The thinking here seems to be that Arjuna's evil kinsmen have brought upon themselves the battle in which they are going to fight, and if they are slain, then they will be reincarnated in a body that fits the *karma* with which they departed this life, which could very well be in hell (which is not a permanent place). Knowing the eternal Self will also free Arjuna from grieving over his own duty to fight, as well as over the death of his kinsmen, and even the prospect of his own suffering and death.

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.

The second response Krishna makes to Arjuna has to do with *yoga*. *Yoga* here does not mean the positional *yoga* with which we are the most familiar, but rather *yoga* as a meditative discipline, in which the mind is freed from the power of *karma*. The discipline of *yoga* frees the mind from the senses, and from the various activities and passions of the body, so that it attains singleness of mind, or *samadhi*, which is unified consciousness. However, lest we think that Krishna is resolving Arjuna's dilemma by exhorting him to retire to the forest to meditate and focus his mind in solitude, Krishna tells him that this *yoga*, and this singleness of mind, takes place in the midst of action, when we act without clinging at all to the consequences of our action. If we act in this way, we will free ourselves from *karma* and the endless cycle of *samsara*—birth, aging, death, rebirth—and experience *moksha*, which means liberation, or *nirvana*, which refers to extinguishing the fire of *karma*.

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. 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*.

Thus, even though Krishna refers to the way of the Upanishads, which is *jnana yoga*, or the contemplative path of spiritual wisdom, the reading for this evening clearly favors *karma yoga*, which is the path of selfless action.

Every selfless act, Arjuna, is born from Brahman, the eternal, infinite Godhead. Brahman is present in every act of service. All life turns on this law, O Arjuna. Strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world; by devotion to selfless work one attains the supreme goal of life.

However, Krishna adds a new element to the teaching of *karma yoga*, which is that complete devotion to Krishna brings about the unification of consciousness in *samadhi* and frees the person from rebirth, even if one performs these actions by taking part in a war against their kinsmen and teachers.

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*.

This means that there is a third path to liberation from death and rebirth, and that is faith or devotion, which in Sanskrit is *bhakti*. As Krishna tells Arjuna:

29 I look upon all creatures equally; none are less dear to me and none more dear. But those who worship me with love live in me, and I come to life in them. 30 Even sinners become holy when they take refuge in me alone. 31 Quickly their souls conform to *dharma* and they attain to boundless peace. Never forget this, Arjuna: no one who is devoted to me will ever come to harm. 32 All those who take refuge in me, whatever their birth, race, sex, or caste, will attain the supreme goal; this realization can be attained even by those whom society scorns. 33 Kings and sages too seek this goal with devotion. Therefore, having been born in this transient and forlorn world, give all your love to me. 34 Fill your mind with me; love me; serve me; worship me always. Seeking me in your heart, you will at last be united with me.

Such *bhakti*, or love and devotion, directly informs Krishna's advice on the right way to die, so that we leave the body and pass into the immortality of Brahman. I will conclude my comments with this remarkable passage, which echoes the descriptions of the right way to die in the Upanishads. Krishna tells Arjuna:

12 Remembering me at the time of death, close down the doors of the senses and place the mind in the heart. Then, while absorbed in meditation, focus all energy upwards to the head. 13 Repeating in this state the divine name, the syllable *Om* that represents the changeless Brahman, you will go forth from the body and attain the supreme goal. 14 I am easily attained by the person who always remembers me and is attached to nothing else.