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# HOW TO USE THE BHAGAVAD - GITA

by JEAN HERBERT

Foreword by  
Vivian Worthington

A HANDBOOK FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

**EDITOR'S NOTE**—We are grateful to Jean Herbert for the text of this lecture which he delivered at the European Union of National Federations of Yoga Seminar in Zinal, Switzerland in 1977, at which gathering he was guest of honour on the occasion of his eightieth birthday. His knowledge of Indian philosophy is probably unequalled and his insight into the natures of Arjuna and Krishna original and enlightening.

Jean Herbert has now retired from a distinguished academic career. He lives in Geneva where his current interest is forwarding integral Yoga in Europe and he works closely with the E.U.N.F.Y. Jean is French, born in Paris, and studied at the universities of Paris and Edinburgh. For sixty years he was a conference interpreter, in particular attending the Paris conference which created the League of Nations and the one in San Francisco which created the United Nations. He was the chief interpreter at the United Nations in New York and president of the International Association of Conference Interpreters.

Jean Herbert became interested in oriental religions at the age of forty, specialising in Hinduism and Shinto. He sat at the feet of all the Hindu sages of the first half of this century and was asked by them to translate and publish their teachings. (His own guru is Shri Aurobindo). He translated some forty volumes and wrote about twenty-five himself. We are privileged to publish here his notes and comments on the Gita.—**CHLORIS MORGAN.**

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## THE BHAGAVAD - GITA

The Bhagavad-Gîtâ, probably the most famous of all sacred books from the East, is a comparably short dialogue between a great warrior, Arjuna, one of the leaders of a great army, and another great warrior, Krishna, who acts as his charioteer. As the final decisive battle with the enemy is about to start, Arjuna is reluctant to fight because he sees among those he should try to kill many of his relatives, teachers, friends whom he respects and loves. Krishna, whom he asks for advice, explains to him what his duty is, and why.

In a nutshell, the Gîtâ covers the essential tenets of Hindu philosophy and the basic spiritual teachings (*yogas*) of Hinduism.

This pamphlet does not claim to be one more commentary on the Bhagavad-Gîtâ; there are already quite enough of them. Its only purpose is to facilitate in two ways an independent study of this sacred text:

- (1) by showing who Krishna and Arjuna really are and what they represent;
- (2) by enabling the student of the Gîtâ to put together verses dealing with the same subject when they are scattered through many different chapters, as is generally the case.

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## PART ONE

### THE TWO MAIN CHARACTERS

Sufficient attention has not been paid to the fact that the Gîtâ is only a minor section of the great Hindu epic, the Mahâbhârata, one of its hundred chapters (*parvan*), and that Krishna and Arjuna both play a very important part throughout the epic. In order to know who they are—which is a “must” if we want to understand their teaching—mere common sense therefore requires us to find out what the rest of the epic tells us about them. No schoolboy, asked to explain a passage in a novel, would be allowed to ignore its context.

To this approach one objection may be raised. Many Western scholars, followed by a very few of their Hindu colleagues, have held that the Gîtâ—either in part or *in toto*—is a later addition to an already existing Mahâbhârata and was composed quite independently from it. The fact that many references to it are to be found in other chapters makes this rather unlikely. But even if this were the case, careful reference to the rest of the epic would still be necessary. If a more recent author wanted to insert an additional dialogue halfway in one of Shakespeare's tragedies, and use the original characters, he would certainly see to it that they remain true to what Shakespeare has made them. The objection therefore is not relevant.

#### KRISHNA

In the Bhagavad-Gîtâ, Krishna appears, more or less alternately, in three different guises: as a plain human being, as an Avatar of Vishnu and as the Purushottama.

He clearly speaks as a man and a *kshatriya* (the caste of warriors) when he explains to Arjuna, a fellow-*kshatriya*, the duties which fall to members of their caste, and what the social consequences would be if those duties were not fulfilled. Arjuna certainly viewed him as a man since he apologises (XI, 41) for having addressed him as friend or comrade. He also calls him twice *Vârshneya*, i.e. member of the *Vrishni* tribe (I, 43; III, 36). In many other passages of the Mahâbhârata Krishna behaves in ways which we take to be specifically human and not fitting for a Divine being: he can get into a temper, he often fails in what he tried to do, he is not always adverse to dishonestly deceiving his opponent, sometimes he cannot remember what he said on previous occasions, etc.

In the Gîtâ however he appears more often as an Avatar of Vishnu. Arjuna addresses him by many names which apply only to him and to Vishnu and which therefore stress his very close relation to the God: *Govinda*, *Hari*, *Keshinisûdana*, five times *Madhusûdana*, six times *Hrishikesh*, seven times *Janârdana*. He even once calls him plain *Vishnu* (XI, 30). All those names appear very frequently throughout the epic, which informs us further that *Garuda*, the Divine bird who is the “vehicle” of Vishnu stands on Krishna's banner or even is Krishna's banner.

Krishna's nature as an Avatar of Vishnu requires some explanation. First of all it is of course necessary to know what Vishnu represents.

Although the Mahâbhârata does not state it explicitly, it is unanimously admitted in Hinduism that Vishnu is one of the three “faces” (*mûrti*) of the one supreme personal God, *Ishvara*, and that his special task is to preserve and protect the world in the consciousness of which we live, and more particularly the human race. Whereas of the other two “faces”, *Brahmâ* is responsible for primordial creation and *Shiva* for destruction and re-creation.

In order to discharge his duty, Vishnu periodically assumes a living terrestrial body, i.e. comes down to Earth as an Avatar. Just as a mother for her child, the “protector” of a “living” entity—and mankind is clearly one—cannot wish it to remain unchanged throughout life, but wants it to grow, develop and improve, such is also the case for Vishnu, and the aim of each one of his successive Avatars is to lead the human race one step further in its evolution.

The main Avatar of Vishnu immediately before Krishna was *Râmachandra*, the hero of the *Râmâyana*, a champion of morality who taught men the *Râma-râj*, i.e. how to live according to the highest ethical principles in a well-ordered society. Coming after him, Krishna tries to awaken in men a dormant thirst for spirituality

and shows and teaches how in practice that thirst can be quenched. That he did in his childhood with the **gopis** in Vrindāvan, and he continues as a prince in the Mahābhārata, including the Bhagavad-Gītā.

But in the Gītā Krishna also declares himself to be the Purushottama, the "Supreme Being" (XV, 18 and 19), and Arjuna explicitly calls him three times by that name (VIII, 1; X, 15; XI, 3).

The Purushottama is a specifically Hindu concept. Hindu philosophy, with its aversion to being walled in in dualities (or multiplicities) admits that behind the ever-changing world of multiplicity in the consciousness of which we live, or rather as its source, there must needs be a static, permanent, unchangeable Absolute, the One. They call it Brahman.

But even that was not enough, because there still remained one ultimate duality, that of unity and multiplicity, of the ultimate reality (the Absolute, Brahman) and its manifestation (Māyā, time and space, etc.). Therefore Hinduism felt it necessary to posit a crowning concept which caps both Unity and Multiplicity, both Brahman and Māyā, the Absolute and its manifestation. This concept is precisely the Purushottama<sup>1</sup>.

It is clearly as such that Krishna explains what he is in Chapters VII, IX and X of the Bhagavad-Gītā and appears to Arjuna in Chapter XI.

It must be admitted that in other passages when Krishna speaks of "Me", as he often does, it is not always very clear whether he refers to himself as an Avatar of Vishnu or as the Purushottama, but in such cases the choice does not seem to have great practical importance.

## ARJUNA

Arjuna is a less complex person than Krishna, but he seems to have been totally misunderstood, or at least misdescribed by practically all commentators. He has almost uniformly been presented as a plain human being facing a God—which is very far indeed from the truth. Just like Krishna, Arjuna is a Divine Avatar, and even more than that.

As stressed many hundreds of times in the Mahābhārata, and as explicitly referred to in many verses of the Bhagavad-Gītā, Arjuna has a very exceptional connection with the God, Indra, of whom he is an Avatar; he is also his son. And Indra, as we shall see, is no less a person than "the King of the Gods [in our world]". Such a combination, both son and Avatar, is unique in Hindu mythology, and probably in any mythology.\*

If we want to understand and apply the teaching of the Bhagavad-Gītā, it is essential for us to know for whom it was intended, and we cannot therefore ignore the nature of Arjuna, which is necessarily defined by his extraordinary dual relation of both son and Avatar to the God Indra.

This relation is explained at great length in the Mahābhārata in two different myths, which are mutually complementary and to which innumerable references are made in all chapters of the poem.

According to the first myth, Indra, who, as we shall see, is of a very proud nature, was having a stroll in the mountains, when he passed by a beautiful young man and a no less beautiful young woman who were having a game of dice. As they did not heed him, he remonstrated: "Don't you know that I am the King of the Gods?" In answer, the young man merely cast a glance at Indra, who was paralysed. The young man was no other than Shiva, one of the three "faces" of the one God, Ishvara. In order to punish Indra for his arrogance, he instructed him to go into a big nearby cave.

There Indra found his four predecessors, the Indras of previous aeons, who had been guilty of the same sin and had been sentenced to the same confinement. Shiva now decided that to expiate their fault (or possibly to make evolution possible for them?), the five Indras should be born as men and remain on Earth for a full human lifetime. So the five Indras became the five Pāndavas, of which Arjuna is one. This is how Arjuna is an Incarnation of Indra.

<sup>1</sup> *It should be noted that for Hindus, Brahman and the Purushottama are not mind-invented concepts, but actual realities which can be experienced by whoever rises to the appropriate level of consciousness, however difficult to achieve that feat may be.*

\*EDITOR'S NOTE—In ancient Egypt, Horus was at once the son of and identical with Serapis, the spouse of Isis.

According to the second myth, King Pându had been cursed by a *rishi* to the effect that he would remain childless. It happened however that one of his two wives, Kuntî (also called Prithâ), had been blessed by another *rishi*—whom she had dutifully served—with a very unusual privilege: she could call any God in the Hindu Pantheon to come down and beget a child on her. As a matter of fact, she had tried it once before her marriage and called the Sun-God, Sûrya; he had given a son, Karna, who was born immediately after the sexual union, and she had then recovered her virginity. But she had been terrified by the experience and had thrown the child into a river.

Seeing her husband's plight, Kuntî told him her secret, and the king decided to avail himself of it in order to have a progeny in spite of the curse. Kuntî accordingly called upon the Gods, Dharma (cosmic law), Vâyu (physical energy) and Indra one after another, and she bore three sons of which the third was Arjuna, therefore a son of Indra.

In order to pacify Pându's second wife, Mâdrî, who naturally felt jealous, Kuntî shared her privilege with her. In her haste, Mâdrî called upon twin Gods, the Ashvins, and became the mother of twins.

The five children of the five Gods are considered to be the "sons" of King Pându, the five Pândavas. They head jointly one of the two coalitions the conflict between which is the main theme of the Mahâbhârata.

The relations of son to father and of Avatar to the original God are stressed by Krishna more than fifty times in the Bhagavad-Gîtâ when he calls Arjuna Kaunteya (son of Kuntî) or Pârtha (son of Prithâ).

There are still more links between Arjuna and Indra. The Mahâbhârata tells us that Arjuna spent five years in his father's palace, sharing his throne with him, that he received from him personally not only his crown and his garlands, but also all his weapons and was taught by him how to use them, that he rode in his celestial car, that he was taught music and dancing by an expert sent by his father—who even wanted him educated in the erotic art.

For all those reasons, it is clearly impossible to understand Arjuna unless one has a fairly clear idea of what Indra represents.

According to Hindu mythology, Indra is the "King of the Gods", but the Gods over whom he has sway are only those which exist in the created universe. They do not include the one Supreme personal God, Ishvara, nor his three "faces", Brahmâ, Vishnu and Shiva, who, so to speak, stand between the Absolute, Brahman, and the world, or, better said, alongside the world (*jagat*), but are not in the world, although they are more or less responsible for it and intervene whenever appropriate.

The Gods who come under Indra, although fully personified and visualised in more or less anthropomorphic form, represent forces at work in our world or worlds (including heavens, hells, etc.). According to certain texts, they number as many as 33,000. Since it is a basic tenet of Hinduism that the microcosm (the human being) is identical to the macrocosm (the universe), their forces are held to be equally active both in the cosmos and in every one of us.

Now, in the chronology of the cosmos, it is clear that the laws (such as gravitation) which govern it must have existed even before solid matter, that inert matter must have existed before living organisms (such as herbs, plants, etc.), and that mind, as it appears in animals and men, must have come still later, and can therefore be considered as the highest step—yet—in evolution.

Similarly, as regards the individual entity, we rate man above the animal because he is more developed mentally, the animal above the plant which is supposed to manifest no mind, and the plant above the stone which is supposed not to be alive.

In both cases therefore, we see mind as the highest quality in the existing world. And it is quite normal that in the world Indra, the King of the Gods, should represent Mind, as was demonstrated at length by the greatest Hindu sage of our times, Shri Aurobindo.

This is fully confirmed by all the numerous episodes in Indra's mythology. All the other Gods (or Forces) in his world acknowledge his supremacy, come at his beck and call and willingly help him whenever he wants them to. Like the mind, he is very powerful indeed, and extremely proud of it, but not all-powerful. In his unceasing fight against the forces which obstruct his action (in mythology the *asuras* mentioned many times by Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gîtâ), he is not always

successful, and although he conquers them periodically, he never succeeds in destroying them once and for all.

Like the mind of the man who relies exclusively upon reason and logic, he is, to say the least, disinclined to admit that other powers, such as intuition, revelation, etc., may lead further than he can go. For that reason he persistently tries to divest sages of their spirituality and of the resulting "powers", because, according to Hindu (and Buddhist) beliefs, the sage, by his spiritual development, can rise higher than the Gods.

When pitted against one of the "faces" of the one Supreme God, such as Shiva, or one of their Avatars, such as Krishna, he is always vanquished and finally admits his inferiority, but they confirm him as King of the Gods in his world, and therefore as King of that world.

Since Arjuna is an Avatar of Indra, he cannot but be essentially mental. This is clearly evidenced in the Bhagavad-Gitā by the questions he asks and the objections he raises: "My mind is reeling" (I, 30); "We do not know" (II, 6); "Thou dost confuse my mind" (III, 2); "Which is the better of the two?" (V, 1). He is assailed by doubts, which is typical of the mind: "Thou shouldst dispel this doubt of mine completely" (VI, 39). Later he says: "My doubts have been dispelled" (XI, 1), and his last words are: "My doubts are gone" (XVIII, 73).

As for Krishna, he repeatedly tries to persuade Arjuna to get rid of all doubts (IV, 40 and 42; V, 25), to get beyond the concept of dualities (dvandva), which is the basis of all doubts (II, 45; IV, 22; VII, 27 and 28).

But Arjuna is not only an Avatar of Indra, he is also his son. And the son is not intended to repeat his father identically; he is expected to go further. That is exactly what Arjuna wants to do. The "mental being" in him takes the position of a disciple at the feet of the "spiritual Master", Krishna—which is the whole story of the Bhagavad-Gitā. This is specified at the very beginning of the poem when Arjuna is called Kapidhvaaja, "whose banner is the monkey" (I, 20). As is stated many times in the Mahābhārata, the "monkey" in question, which sits on Arjuna's banner is no other than the monkey-bodied God Hanumān, the ally and devotee of Rāmachandra in the Rāmāyana, who is considered by all Hindus as the perfect disciple.

## KRISHNA AND ARJUNA

All the above shows that Krishna, when seeking to impart spirituality to mankind selected as the person best qualified to receive his teaching the one which was most fully developed mentally and also ready to go beyond the realm of pure mentality. This is important, because it shows that silencing the mind is not the purpose of yoga, as is too often believed. Silencing it occasionally for a very short time should only help to increase its potentialities and re-orient its activities, which are essential in any yoga. Spiritual research should therefore neither ignore nor discard intellectual activity. Their complementarity is shown in the myth by the very close relation between Arjuna and Krishna.

First of all, it is stated more than twenty times in the Mahābhārata that in a former life they were a twin Incarnation of Vishnu, the famous rishis Nara and Nārāyana.

In this life they were "born at the same time and for the same purpose" and they were first cousins, Arjuna's mother, Kuntī, being a sister of Krishna's father, Vasudeva (Krishna is commonly called Vāsudeva, i.e. son of Vasudeva). In addition to which they had to become brothers-in-law. Krishna himself selected Arjuna to be the husband of his sister Subhadrā. This is significant because in Hindu mythology the "Power of manifestation" (Shakti) of a God is personified as a female, who may be his wife or his daughter or in rare cases his sister. At this stage in Krishna's life, it was clearly Subhadrā. The marriage therefore meant that Krishna transmitted to Arjuna his "Power of manifestation".

## CONCLUSION

When the facts mentioned above are taken into account, it follows that the Bhagavad-Gitā should not be read and studied as a teaching handed down by God to man, but rather as a dialogue not only between two cosmic powers, but also—which is of much more immediate concern to us—between two trends which obtain in every one of us: the demands of our logically-oriented "reason"—which, as in Arjuna's case often proves incapable to choose between two apparently incompatible duties—and our spiritual aspirations, which are in frequent opposition to it. This makes the practical application of the Gitā considerably more effective.

## PART TWO

### SUBJECT INDEX OF THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

Any Westerner who tries to study the Bhagavad-Gitā must be struck by the fact that the order of presentation of its teaching is not that to which we are accustomed, although it is probably the one best suited to Hindus. Krishna deals with three main subjects: abstract philosophy, the prerequisites for the practice of any yoga, and the technique of each one of the four main yogas. But he goes constantly from one to another, from one sub-division to another, without any apparent order. To give only a few examples, he refers to *gunas* in six different chapters, to successive lives in seven, to desire in twelve and to Karma-Yoga in thirteen. The purpose of this Index is to enable the reader to bring together all the verses in which he deals with the same topic.

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