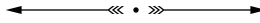


An Excerpt From

JOURNEY INTO  
THE  
**BHAGAVAD  
GITA**



A Guide to Exploring  
Timeless Principles of Transcendental Knowledge  
and Integrating Them Into Your Life

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# The Topics and Structure of the Bhagavad-gītā



*“But if you study the logistics and heuristics of the mystics you will  
find that their minds rarely move in a line.”*

~ Brian Eno

The dialogue of the Bhagavad-gītā takes a non-linear path through an extraordinary landscape, the contours of which redefine the boundaries of reality. Knowing what topics will be discussed and how the dialogue is structured will make it a lot easier to navigate your way across the Gītā’s literary landscape.

In the Gītā’s first chapter, Arjuna realizes that, win or lose, the results of the battle will be catastrophic. He’s torn as to what he should do. Fighting is what’s expected of him. After all, he’s a warrior. But, warrior or not, he can think of four reasons why he shouldn’t fight:

1. Compassion for the combatants
2. Unhappiness even if he wins
3. Social instability as inevitable collateral damage
4. Fear of bad karmic reactions

Arjuna's confusion is traditionally considered to be the fifth reason why he's unable to summon the determination to fight.

Here's a brief elaboration on each of Arjuna's reasons:

**1. Compassion for the combatants:** Arjuna is kind-hearted by nature. He isn't motivated to kill his enemies or to cause the deaths of his friends, teachers, and family members no matter what he might gain from doing so.

**2. Unhappiness even if he wins:** Arjuna will not be able to enjoy whatever power, wealth, and fame victory might bring if it will have cost the lives of everyone on the battlefield.

**3. Social instability as inevitable collateral damage:** Arjuna assumes that the deaths of those who are responsible for upholding dharmic values will result in a breakdown of family cohesion and undermine social stability.

**4. Fear of bad karmic reactions:** Arjuna is all too aware that killing is sinful, to say nothing of how sinful it is to kill members of one's own family for personal gain.

**5. Indecision:** Arjuna has become paralyzed by confusion. Not knowing what to do and in no condition to do anything, the foremost of warriors does the unthinkable: he drops his weapons, sits down, and, from the depths of unfathomable despair, declares that he won't fight.

In his paralyzed state, Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa for guidance. In response, Kṛṣṇa addresses each of Arjuna's reasons for not fighting by way of a philosophical argument that's based on a comprehensive explanation of five core topics:

1. The infinitesimal individual self
2. The Infinite Supreme Self
3. Material nature
4. The law of action and reaction
5. Time

Three additional topics can be broken out from these five topics:

6. The infinitesimal individual self under the influence of material nature
7. The characteristics of the material world
8. Yoga

Here's a brief elaboration on each of these topics:

**1. The infinitesimal individual self**, as noted earlier, refers to an *ātmā* (or *jīva*): an individual spiritual entity, the presence of which is symptomized by consciousness. You, me, and every other sentient being in the world, irrespective of the body that we inhabit, is understood to be an irreducible and indestructible living unit of consciousness.

**2. The Infinite Supreme Self** refers to the one *ātmā* who is categorically different from all other *ātmā*-s by virtue of being the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, independent, and inconceivable source and ultimate substance of everyone and everything. In other words, God, or the one *ātmā* who, unlike all other *ātmā*-s, is uniquely qualified to hold the position of God.

**3. Material nature** refers to the aforementioned divine energy comprised of three perpetually interactive qualities (*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*) that combine to provide the metaphysical substance of the physical world.

**4. The law of action and reaction** refers to *karma*: actions that generate pleasant or unpleasant reactions according to how those actions align or misalign with an objective standard of cosmic order.

**5. Time** (*kāla*) refers to the phenomenon of past, present, and future that establishes the relationship between embodied souls and material nature. Conspicuous by its absence in the spiritual realm of pure consciousness, unstoppable time is the foremost representative of divine power in the material world.

**6. The infinitesimal individual self under the influence of material nature** refers to the characteristics we acquire when we become conditioned by a particular combination of the three qualities of material nature and misidentify ourselves as being those transient material characteristics rather than as being what we really are: eternal, pure, and inherently joyful spiritual beings.

**7. The characteristics of the material world** refers to the intrinsic features of the world of our experience, which is composed of the three qualities of material nature and animated by their interactions.

**8. Yoga** refers to the practical technology by which the theories of knowledge put forward in the Bhagavad-gītā can be tested and verified by direct perception.

If at any point you feel as if you've lost track of where the conversation between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna has gone, you can refer back to this list to see which topic or combination of topics are being discussed in order to get back on track.

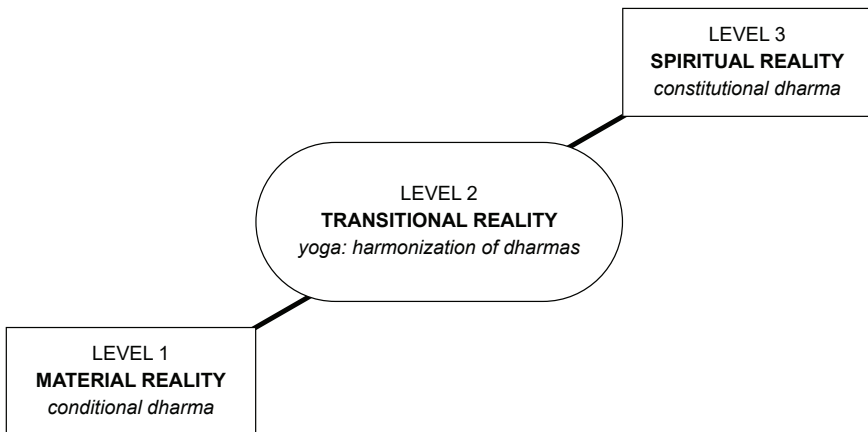
When Arjuna turns to Kṛṣṇa for guidance, Kṛṣṇa immediately attempts to re-orient Arjuna's perspective by changing the level of the conversation. In other words, Kṛṣṇa doesn't accept the underlying premise of Arjuna's argument, which is that there must be some way for everyone to live happily ever after.

But Kṛṣṇa's attempts at reorientation don't stick right away; Arjuna can't map Kṛṣṇa's perspective onto his own frame of reference. As a result, Arjuna remains confused by Kṛṣṇa's instructions for the first several chapters. He can't reconcile what he's hearing with what he thinks he already knows. Arjuna's initial inability to see what Kṛṣṇa is trying to show him speaks to our own predicament of being limited to looking at the world through the lens of our own biases.

So if you get to chapters 4 or 5 of the Bhagavad-gītā and you think you're not getting it yet, don't worry: Arjuna doesn't get it yet, either.

The twists and turns of the dialogue in the Bhagavad-gītā can be difficult to follow because the conversation proceeds in a somewhat elliptical pattern, where topics that are covered on a rudimentary level in earlier chapters are revisited and expanded upon in later chapters. However, this non-linear dialogue moves back and forth along a fixed structure that connects two categories of *dharma*: conditional *dharma* and constitutional *dharma*. Understanding the distinction between these two kinds of *dharma* and learning to recognize the structure along which the dialogue moves will make it easier to follow the conversation.

Plot, character, and conflict are the three basic elements that form the structure of a story. The Bhagavad-gītā integrates these three basic elements into a three-tiered story structure that's based on a hierarchical concept of reality consisting of two levels of experience and an intermediate level that connects them. Here's what that looks like:



The dialogue between the characters, Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, moves up and down this structure as Kṛṣṇa tries to help Arjuna resolve his inner conflict. The plot, however, is driven in a resolutely upward trajectory, using the middle level as a bridge to cross from the bottom level of reality to the top level. Each elliptical movement of the dialogue drives the plot further upward along the structure to progressively higher levels of knowledge about each level of reality.

You can recognize each level of reality by its different values and the different states of being that are associated with each of them. Here's a brief description of the values and states of being that are associated with each level:

### **Level 1: Material Reality or the experience of 'conditional' *dharma***

Material reality consists of temporal, worldly life experienced through the lens of material consciousness. Material consciousness is the state of being wherein our perception is filtered through and limited by the experiential bandwidth of our material body, mind, and senses.

Our sense of *dharma* is conditioned by material consciousness; consciousness under the influence of the three qualities of material nature. Hence, life on the level of material reality is characterized by personal and social conceptions of vocation, duty, rights, religion, morality, law, order, and justice based on a sense of bodily identity, such as “I'm White, I'm Black, I'm male, I'm female, I'm this nationality or that ethnicity, I subscribe to this religion or that political ideology,” etc.

Material consciousness also extends this bodily conception of identity to other beings. Unlike spiritual consciousness, wherein we would think of a dog as an *ātmā* in a dog body, someone in material consciousness will think of an *ātmā* in a dog body as *being* a dog, an *ātmā* in a bird body as *being* a bird, an *ātmā* in a fish body as a fish, an *ātmā* in a human body as a human, and so on.

Worldly happiness and prosperity are the primary values of material consciousness, the former usually being seen as dependent on the latter. Actions are deemed to be right or wrong based on their likely outcome and attachment to the results of those actions is considered perfectly normal. In material consciousness, to “live long and prosper” is understood to be the logical goal of life.

At some point, however, those caught up in material reality or conditional *dharma* may begin to think that life is meant for a higher purpose than the pursuit of material enjoyment - in which case, they may feel drawn to approach the next level of experience.

## **Level 2: Transitional Reality or the path of yoga**

Transitional reality, or the path of yoga, is the bridge between the experience of material reality and the experience of spiritual reality. The path of yoga is one of progressive detachment from worldly life and movement toward liberation from the constraints of material consciousness.

The values of yoga favor the attainment of equanimity in both happiness and distress over the attainment of worldly prosperity. A yoga practitioner strives to develop equal-mindedness toward all beings irrespective of the body that they inhabit, and attachment to the pursuit of transcendental knowledge becomes stronger than attachment to the pursuit of material desires.

Whereas action in material consciousness is dictated by our conditional *dharma*, action in yogic consciousness is guided by five principles of transitional *dharma*: austerity, purity, mercy, truthfulness, and surrender to the Supreme Person. These five principles support the harmonization of our conditional *dharma* with our constitutional *dharma*.

To get a better sense of how someone on the path of yoga would practically apply these principles, here's a brief description of each:

1. **Austerity** has two meanings. The first is to minimize material comforts to just what's needed in order to live peacefully. The second is to intentionally step out of our comfort zones for the sake of personal growth.
2. **Purity** means to maintain bodily and environmental cleanliness. It also means saintliness of character or freedom from corruption.



3. **Mercy** means being compassionate to all sentient beings and offering kindness even to those who are themselves unkind.
4. **Truthfulness** means being honest, living with integrity, and acting in alignment with the highest truth we can conceive of.
5. **Surrender to the Supreme Person** means making ourselves available for service to the highest truth we can conceive of, allowing ourselves to become instruments of divine will, accepting the will of providence insofar as the results of our actions are concerned, and having faith that, whatever happens, we're always being brought closer to God.

Transitional reality is characterized by a state of being wherein we think of ourselves and others as eternal spiritual beings having temporary material experiences rather than as being the temporary material bodies that we inhabit. The ethics of transitional reality bend in the direction of principles rather than outcomes and those who are in transitional consciousness proceed under the assumption that an action that conforms to universal principles of righteousness will ultimately bring about the best possible outcome.

As we cross the bridge of yoga, the third level of experience comes into view.

### **Level 3: Spiritual Reality or constitutional *dharma***

Spiritual reality is the level of reality in which we experience ourselves in our natural, liberated state of spiritual existence. Having crossed the bridge of yoga, theoretical spirituality is transformed into experiential spirituality. We experience ourselves as being integrally connected to all other beings through the agency of the infinite and complete whole of which we are all infinitesimal parts. This state of being is therefore characterized by feelings

of intense compassion for all beings, a sense of being intimately connected to everyone and everything, an awareness of the omnipresence of Universal Consciousness, and a feeling of intimate connection to the Supreme Divinity.

Our sense of the world is determined by the level of reality we're experiencing. If we're on the level of material reality then we'll be convinced that we are the bodies that we inhabit, that what happens to our bodies happens to us, and that the goal of life is to enjoy life for as long as possible. If we're on the transitional level of reality, then we'll have reasonable faith that we're embodied spirit souls having a temporary material experience and the goal of life is to transcend material consciousness. And if we're on the level of spiritual reality then we'll see the Supreme Being everywhere and see everything in connection with the Supreme Being.

Someone whose frame of reference is limited to material reality can't access the higher levels of yoga and spiritual reality. This is Arjuna's starting point: he's thinking solely in terms of material reality and therefore trying to sort out his dilemma based on the values of conditional *dharma*.

By contrast, Kṛṣṇa's frame of reference is the complete set of all three levels of reality. He's not limited to the same set of assumptions or values that Arjuna is limited to. Kṛṣṇa's immediate response to Arjuna's arguments against fighting is to re-frame the entire discussion by introducing a higher level of reality, spiritual reality, as the context within which material reality operates. And he introduces yoga, the intermediate level of reality, as the means by which our conditional *dharma* can be harmonized with our constitutional *dharma*.

Seeing his friend incapacitated by despair, Kṛṣṇa meets Arjuna where he's at in order to guide him toward progressively higher levels of consciousness. In doing so, Kṛṣṇa dispels Arjuna's doubts about how he should act. The elevation of Arjuna's consciousness gives him access to a broader vision of reality. And that broader

vision provides the impetus for Arjuna's transformational journey from fear and confusion to courage and conviction.

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The elliptical movement of the Gītā's dialogue along its three-tiered conception of reality serves to unite the terrestrial with the transcendental. The unifying technology, yoga, can be seen as having four distinct paths and as four steps on one integrated path. While each path is sufficient unto itself for achieving liberation, there are levels of realization *beyond* liberation. And the ultimate fulfillment of three of the paths of yoga is dependent on the fourth. How the four paths of yoga can be both independent and hierarchical can be understood when we take a closer look at each step on the ladder that connects material reality to spiritual reality.

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