

General Introduction

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is a literary and theological treatise and a foremost world classic; it has occupied both an authoritative and popular position within Hinduism for the last 1,000 years or so. Due to its major influence, it is sometimes called ‘The Hindu Bible’ or even ‘The Indian Bible’; moreover, innumerable people worldwide are able to quote it – whether in their mother language or in the original Sanskrit – as an expression of their faith or worldview. The treatise itself appears as part of the *Mahābhārata*,¹ the great Indian epos, and comprises a dialogue conducted between two of its heroes – the commander-in-chief Arjuna and his cousin, charioteer and friend, Kṛṣṇa. Although the dialogue is rather short and does not exceed 700 verses, it is engaged with subject matters of the highest theological and philosophical order; as such, it concerns everyone who faces human existence, namely each and every human being. The epical circumstances are rather dramatic; due to a long family strife, all the world’s armies gather at the battlefield of *Kurukṣetra*, some supporting one family branch, the *Pāṇḍavas* or the sons of Pāṇḍu, while the others supporting the Kauravas, or the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Arjuna foresees the massacre about to take place, and is reluctant to direct his weapons towards his family members, friends and teachers; as such he desires to relinquish the war altogether and avoid fighting in these terrible circumstances. Out of his deep distress, Arjuna turns to his friend Kṛṣṇa, and asks for directions which may rescue him from this severe crisis. Answering Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa speaks the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which may be possibly translated somewhat roughly as the ‘Song of God’, or perhaps more precisely as the ‘Supreme Person’s Sacred Poetical Treatise’. It is likely that the *Bhagavad Gītā* was composed around the fourth to the second centuries BCE, and as such belongs roughly to the same period as that of the great Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. From the religious point of view, the *Bhagavad Gītā* is a *Vaiṣṇava* text, as it considers Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa to be the Supreme Lord, whereas from the philosophical point of view, the *Bhagavad Gītā* comprises one of the triple foundations of the *Vedānta* tradition,² along with the *Brahmasūtras* and the *Upaniṣads*. From the cultural and social point of view, the *Bhagavad Gītā* represents orthodox and mainstream Hinduism, in that it accepts the authority of the *Veda*, and the social-religious order of four social groups called *Varṇāśrama*, which is at the heart of *dharma*.

¹ Chapters 23–40 of the *Bhīṣmaparvan*.

² *Prasthāna trayī*.

Dharma as Comprising and Defining Human Society

The term *dharma* is central to Indian thought, and may be translated as religion, duty, morality, justice, law and order. *Dharma* is not only external to the human being, rather it is perceived as comprising the essence or nature of everything. As such, it aspires to place everything – not only the human being but the whole of phenomena, in its proper place. Thus, for example, the *dharma* of the teacher is to teach, and the *dharma* of the sun is to shine. *Dharma* aspires to establish human society on a solid moral foundation and, as such, it defines the human being through two parameters which are the personal and professional statuses. The personal status is defined through one's relation to family life, and it is comprised by dividing human life into four stages. As such, one spends his childhood and youth as a celibate student, a *brahmacārī*, practicing austerity and discipline while living devoid of possessions under the direction of the *guru*. Along with the character-building one undergoes, he studies the spiritual traditions and develops awareness of the highest truth named *Brahman*. Having concluded his training period, he enters the stage of married life called *gṛhastha*, and fulfils the four aims of life; he follows *dharma* and contributes to the maintenance of the social order, he accumulates wealth, satisfies his desires, and eventually turns his attention towards *mokṣa*, the ideal of liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Once his children have grown up, he gradually returns to the more renounced mode of life practiced during youth, and enters into the *vānaprastha* stage along with his wife. Gradually, the couple becomes detached from family, social, economic and political matters, and turns their attention towards more spiritual matters. At the last stage of one's life, one becomes a *sannyāsī*, and renounces the world altogether, both internally and externally. In this stage he meets death, and being enlightened and detached, he is able to get freed from the vicious cycle of rebirth.

The second parameter defining the human being is the professional one; as such, *dharma* defines four occupational groups which cover the entire range of occupations, supporting a proper human society. The first group is that of the brahmins, who, according to the ancient *Vedic* metaphor, comprise the head of the social body. This is the intellectual class, comprised of teachers, priests, philosophers and intellectuals, and they are characterized by qualities such as tranquility, self-restraint, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, knowledge, wisdom and religious piety. They guide and advise human society and they do this from a distant position, without assuming political or governmental authority. The second group is that of the *kṣatriyas*, who, according to the *Vedic* metaphor, comprise the arms of the social body. This is the ruling class comprised of kings, nobles, generals and administrators, and they are characterized by heroism, ardor, determination, expertise, fighting spirit, generosity and leadership. The third group is that of the *vaiśyas* or the agriculture and mercantile class; they comprise the hips of the social body and support society through establishing a firm economic foundation based upon agriculture and trade. The fourth group, the *śūdras*, comprise the legs or feet of the social body, and this is the working and serving class, which includes

artisans and craftsmen. The system itself is considered to be of a divine origin, and moreover, not be artificially enforced upon human society, rather to be springing from natural categories and human nature. As such, Kṛṣṇa says that ‘the four social classes were created by me according to the divisions of the *guṇas*³ and modes of work’.⁴ *Dharma* is upheld through adhering to one’s duties, and the *Bhagavad Gītā* supports this principle, by advising or requesting each and every one to adhere to his or her duty. As such, it says: ‘Better to be deficient in following one’s own *dharmic* duty, than to perform another’s duty well; even death while performing one’s own duty is better, for following another’s duty invites danger’.⁵ Apparently, this idea of the four *varṇas* or classes is philosophical rather than empirical.⁶

***Mokṣa* – the Call for Relinquishing the World of Birth and Death Altogether**

The ideal moral world which is aimed at by *dharma* is doomed to confront human reality which is naturally less ideal, as human existence which is full of weaknesses and faults is somewhat different than the ideal *dharmic* world which is somewhat utopian. This gap occupies a major part of the *Mahābhārata*, where, on the one hand, a description of persons who were able to adhere to *dharma* despite various obstacles is given, and on the other hand, various human weaknesses which prevent one from adherence to duty are delineated. This more pessimistic view of the world leads to the understanding that human existence is ultimately doomed to suffering, and that the only real solution to this problem is the relinquishment of the world altogether. This call, characterizing the *Upaniṣadic* literature and the *Vedāntin* tradition, calls upon the human being to undergo a process of self-correction or self-realization, and altogether relinquish the vicious cycle of birth and death called *saṃsāra*. Accordingly, this world, which is temporary and transient, is never to be considered one’s highest goal, as it is of lesser value than the principle or person from whom the world has emanated. As such, the *Bhagavad Gītā* states: ‘Having come to me, these great souls do not again undergo rebirth into that transient abode of misery, as they have attained the highest perfection. All the worlds, up to Brahmā’s world, are subject to repeated births, but having once reached me, there is no further rebirth.’⁷ This well exemplifies the *Upaniṣadic* idea according to which one should relinquish this world in favour of a higher, imperishable perfect and eternal state, which is the state of liberation or *mokṣa*.

³ Quality, constituent; for a more elaborate explanation of the term see p. 9.

⁴ *BG* 4.13.

⁵ *BG* 3.35.

⁶ As a philosophical treatise, the *Bhagavad Gītā* furthers the idea of four classes or *varṇas*, whereas the present-day Indian empirical reality, which may be historically derived from the *Vedic* ideal of four classes, is characterized by *jātis* or hundreds of social subdivisions.

⁷ *BG* 8.15–16.

The Tension between *Dharma* and *Mokṣa*

Whereas *dharma* aspires for the moral upliftment of the world and the establishment of a proper and prosperous human society, the *Upaniṣadic* ideal is entirely different and even contradictory, as it calls for a total relinquishment of this world, along with the helpless transmigration from one body to another which characterizes it. Moreover, the *Upaniṣadic* tradition calls one to transcend *dharma*, to go beyond morality and the quest for social order, in favour of a state of introspection and a constant thrust towards self-realization and liberation from the cycle of birth and death. The *Bhagavad Gītā* states that ‘for one who is delighted in the self alone, and is thus self satisfied and self content indeed, for him – no *dharmic* duty exists’.⁸ It seems that the *Upaniṣadic* tradition is not that concerned with morality and social order, rather it is mainly concerned with the relinquishment of this world and with self-realization. The idea that one who is established in the path of liberation is free from *dharmic* and moral obligations is rather extreme and no doubt exemplifies the deep gap between these two systems of thought.

The *dharma* and *Upaniṣadic* traditions are opposed to each other in yet another cardinal question, and that is the question of action versus knowledge. The *dharma* tradition carries a notable performative flavour, which may have its origins traced back to the ancient *Vedic Mīmāṃsā* school, whereas the *Upaniṣadic* tradition is different in that it emphasizes knowledge over action. *Dharma* aspires to organize the world through action; the brahmin teaches and sacrifices, the *kṣatriya* rules and protects, the *vaiśya* farms and trades and the *śūdra* works manually. The *Upaniṣadic* tradition aspires to reach the understanding or knowing of the essence of all things, which is ultimately spiritual. Moreover, it encourages the renunciation of action and of worldly involvement, in favour of the attainment of real knowledge and enlightenment. The question is raised by Arjuna, and he asks for a clear direction which is the path to be followed; the path of action and adherence to duty, or the path of renunciation of duty in favour of enlightenment. He asks: ‘O Janārdana, if you consider enlightenment to be better than action, why then do you enjoin me to perform this terrible act? Your equivocal like words confuse my mind; I beg you, make me certain of one thing, by which I may attain the best.’⁹

The *Bhagavad Gītā* occupies a unique place in the history of Indian literature and thought in that it reconciles this deep tension and gap. On the one hand the *Bhagavad Gītā* adheres to *dharma* by enjoining the following of one’s duty in accordance with the *varṇāśrama* system, thereby supporting the moral and social order. At the same time, it supports the *Upaniṣadic* ideal of renouncing the world altogether in favour of self-realization and the attainment of liberation, but propounds the unique and groundbreaking idea of an internal relinquishment, rather than an external one. In other words, as opposed to an external relinquishment, where one leaves home and social responsibility in favour of becoming a

⁸ BG 3.17.

⁹ BG 3.1–2.

wandering mendicant or a forest-dweller, the *Bhagavad Gītā* furthers an internal relinquishment, by which one adheres to *dharma*, but makes an internal progress along the path of renunciation, by gradually learning to renounce the fruits of action, and then devote them to the supreme. This interesting reconciliation of the two otherwise contradictory ideals, offers a system which intertwines social responsibility and action in the world, with a deep sense of spirituality and relinquishment of worldly attachments. A famous verse propounding this internal renunciation says: ‘Your sole entitlement is to perform *dharmic* activity, not ever to possess its fruits; never shall the fruit of an action motivate your deed, and never cleave to inaction.’¹⁰

The *Bhagavad Gītā*’s Unifying Structure

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is no doubt a unique literary creation, but at the same time deciphering its meaning and philosophy is not easy or simple. Klaus Klostermaier refers to the challenge facing the reader in understanding the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

Whoever reads it for the first time will be struck by its beauty and depth; countless Hindus know it by heart and quote it in many occasions as an expression of their faith and their insights. All over India, and also in many places in the Western hemisphere, *Gītā* lectures attract large numbers of people. Many are convinced that the *Bhagavad Gītā* is the key book for the respiritualization of humankind in our age. A careful study of the *Gītā*, however, will very soon reveal the need for a key to this key book. Simple as the tale may seem and popular as the work has become, it is by no means an easy book and some of the greatest Indianists have grappled with the historical and philosophical problems it presents.¹¹

These words no doubt touch upon one of the main challenges in understanding this treatise; can it be tied together by a relatively simple and unifying theme or structure? I believe that this is possible, and in order to understand the *Bhagavad Gītā*’s structure and main theme, I offer the metaphor of a three-storey house. This house not only has three floors, storeys or tiers, but has a staircase or ladder, leading the residents from the first floor to the second, and from the second to the third. The lower floor represents human life in this world, the second floor is an intermediate floor, whereby one relinquishes worldly life and seeks the state of liberation, and the third floor represents full absorption in the liberated state. The stages of the staircase or the ladder are comprised of various states of action categorized according to their underlying motivation; at the lower stage one’s acts are motivated by some utilitarian principle or gain; a stage still higher is when one

¹⁰ BG 2.47.

¹¹ Klaus Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism* (2nd edition, Albany, 1994), p. 99.

seeks gain beyond this life in the heavenly world, and a higher stage is the stage of relinquishment of action's fruits, thus acting for the sake of duty or *dharma* alone. A state still higher is the performance of one's *dharmic* duty as a practice of *yoga*, i.e. considering the performance of duty to be the means by which the mind may be subdued. The highest state is the state of performing one's *dharmic* duty while being liberated and entirely immersed in the supreme. In this way, the *Bhagavad Gītā* adheres to both ideals; it supports social responsibility, morality and *dharma*, and at the same time, it endorses the *Upaniṣadic* path of self-realization, which leads one from the depth of material existence all the way up to liberation.¹²

The Vedic Sacrifices and the Humanistic View of the 'First Tier'

Vedic ritualistic sacrifices were common in ancient India; some sacrifices were domestic whereas others were public, some were simple whereas others were sophisticated and expensive. Underlying all the various sacrifices was a deep faith in the perfection of the *Veda*, and the conviction that sacrifice is the way for the attainment of prosperity, both in this life and the next. A major purpose or fruit to be achieved by the performance of the *Vedic* sacrifice was the attainment of heaven; it is not entirely clear where exactly heaven is situated; it may be taken geographically, as a particular higher planet, but also as a higher state of existence. It is apparent, however, that heavenly life was considered to be a more pleasurable existential state, and that normally one would aspire to achieve this state in the next life. Heaven's opposite was considered to exist too, and that is hell; whether this refers to a geographical place, apparently located at the bottom of the universe, or whether this refers to a lower state of existence, it is apparent that according to *Vedic* thought, hellish life is a state of suffering and should be avoided. Accordingly, the *Vedas* are considered eternal and perfect, and hence the somewhat problematic position of the *Vedic* sacrifices and rituals; on the one hand, some claim that as the *Vedas* are of a divine origin, it is one's sacred duty to perform *Vedic* sacrifice and attain prosperity, both in this life and the next. Others, who further the path of liberation, agree that the *Vedas* are of a divine origin, but consider the ultimate goal to be the renunciation of worldly pleasures and prosperity in favour of liberation. As such, they consider worldly prosperity as a blessing which should be accepted moderately, but certainly not as the ultimate goal; accordingly, worldly prosperity should be considered as a healthy condition of a society which is gradually progressing towards liberation. Considering the above said, it seems that the *Vedic* worldview represents what we call the 'first storey'; it is optimistic as it aspires for healthy, moral, proper and prosperous human life. In that, it aspires to avoid that which is immoral and unjust and further that which is healthy and righteous. It is humanistic in that it perceives reality

¹² A deeper analysis of the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s structure follows the General Introduction. See p. 17.

in complete and unbroken terms centred around the human being; as such, its worldview is constructed by terms such as the human being, the family, society and, above all, *dharma* which constantly strives to uplift human society.

The Embodied Soul, the Problem of Transmigration and the *Yogic* View of the ‘Second Tier’

The main problem characterizing this world, and even the next or the heavenly world, is the constant repetition of birth and death. The constant change, the inherent instability, the engagement of an otherwise free spiritual soul in a body destined to die, the constant struggle with the senses and their unsatiated desires, all these make the worldly and embodied state undesirable. Moreover, seen from the *Bhagavad Gītā*’s second tier’s point of view, even the state of heavenly life, which can be attained through the performance of *Vedic* sacrifices, is flawed by this vicious cycle of birth and death. In other words, having spent prolonged periods of time in the enjoyable heavenly state, one falls down again into the lower worlds and into lower states of existence. This vision naturally leads to an attempt to get free from this embodied state, by taking to the process of self-realization, which includes a different set of categories. Progressing along the path of self-realization, one begins to think of himself or herself in different terms; instead of considering oneself to be a human being, one starts thinking of himself as an eternal spiritual soul, rather different to the gross and subtle coverings, i.e. the body and the mind, which cover and engage him. As such, it is said: ‘As childhood, youth and old age befall the soul within this body, so it comes to acquire another body; the wise is not swayed by illusion in this matter.’¹³

This point of view is what we may call a ‘second storey’ one; from this point of view one sees his own body and mind as external to himself, considers his deep entanglement with matter to be circumstantial, non-essential and an obstacle on the path of liberation, and in this state he tries not only to sever his deep relations with matter and mind, but to gain hold of the spiritual reality of *Brahman*, in either its personal or impersonal form. This worldview or the vision of the soul, i.e. the ‘second storey’ worldview, does not really aim at constructing a prosperous and moral human society, rather, it furthers the relinquishment of this world altogether. It is not really humanistic, as the term ‘human being’ does not play a very significant role in it, rather the term ‘spiritual soul’ seems to construct the individual identities in this view, and as such it may be considered a ‘spiritualistic’ view. As such, the fundamental individual element is the spiritual soul, covered by various bodies which are not necessarily human; these may be bodies of plants, trees, reptiles, fish, animals, humans or gods, etc. This worldview, which is based upon the vision of spiritual souls engaged in gross and subtle bodies, has an ethical implication, too; as it envisions souls engaged in bodies, it naturally

¹³ BG 2.13.

further the release of those embodied souls. As such, it furthers a different set of values than those of the ‘first storey’; instead of furthering human prosperity, it propounds equanimity towards both the good and the bad, towards both happiness and distress, towards both prosperity and poverty, and towards both the moral and the immoral. This equanimity serves as a foundation based upon which one can look beyond this world and search after the spiritual reality which is utterly different, and is designated as eternal, conscious and blissful. As such, there are two components of the ‘second storey’: one the one hand, the attempt to release oneself from the embodied state, and on the other hand, the attempt to establish or yoke oneself within the supreme, absolute and spiritual reality. As these two principles, i.e. attempting to detach oneself from this world and attempting to yoke oneself to a higher state or reality, underlie the various *yoga* systems, this view may also be considered the ‘*yogic* view’.

Mental Restraint as the Focus of the Various *Yoga* Systems

The various *yoga* systems all aspire to transfer the practitioner from the state of worldly existence, into the enlightened and liberated state. The practice focuses on the mind,¹⁴ which in the unrestrained state binds the soul to embodiment, while in the restrained and transparent state it leads the soul to liberation. The mind unites the physical body, the senses and the soul, and is considered to have an immense capability of leading the soul towards enlightenment. However, being unrestrained, disturbed and obscure due to its close relation with the senses and the various worldly desires aroused by them, it fails to realize its potential. The *yoga* systems, therefore, aspire to restrain and clean the mind, just like one cleans a mirror or a lens for the purpose of seeing clearly. In its obscure state, the mind is disturbed by the working of nature represented by the three *guṇas*, by agitation aroused by attraction, by repulsion aroused by sense objects, by misconceptions of the self and various memories, and by the urge of self-preservation and the fear of death. A clear consciousness may be compared to a clear and peaceful lake, which is transparent and, as such, its bottom may be viewed, while an obscure consciousness may be compared to a stormy lake of muddy water, which is naturally non-transparent and its bottom unseen. The two core principles of the *yoga* system are practice and detachment; while practice aims at the gradual restraint of the turbulent mind, detachment aims at disconnecting the mind from the various sense objects to which it is attached. Chapter 6 is engaged with this topic and advises the practitioner of *yoga*: ‘Casting aside all desires arising from worldly intentions, he should subdue completely the combined senses through the mind. Little by little should he bring his mind to rest, while firmly controlling his consciousness; he should fix his mind on the self, contemplating nothing else.

¹⁴ Sanskrit: *manas*.

From whatever and wherever the flickering and unsteady mind wanders, it is to be restrained and led back into the control of the self.’¹⁵

The *yoga* system is not merely theoretical, rather it furthers a psycho-physic practice. The classical text *Yogasūtra*, traditionally attributed to Patañjali,¹⁶ articulates an eight-stage ladder-like structure which, in a sense, serves as an archetype for the *yoga* system; the eight stages commence with practices which may be considered ethical, and culminate with the stage of *samādhi*, a liberated state of ecstasy or enlightenment. The first stage is called *yama* or restraint, and it includes the practice of non-violence, adherence to truthfulness, non-stealing, the practice of *brahmacārya* which includes sexual abstinence, and non-accumulation. The second stage is *niyama*, and it is comprised of cleanliness or purity, satisfaction, austerity, self-study and scriptural study, and devotion to the supreme. The third stage, *āsana*, includes an elaborate practice of bodily postures, and this is followed by *prāṇāyāma*, the stage of breath control. Following that one practices *pratyāhāra* or the withdrawal of the senses from their objects, and this is followed by *dhāraṇā* or concentration in which one strives to maintain this sense withdrawal over an extended period of time. The seventh stage is that of *dhyaṇa* and its essence is meditation on the supreme, while the peak of the system is the eighth stage called *samādhi*, in which the *yogī* enters a state of an introspective enlightenment beyond worldly existence. This state is described in Chapter 6: ‘When the consciousness rests peacefully, restrained by practice of *yoga*, then can the self see itself directly, and be thus satisfied within itself. At that time he knows infinite bliss, experienced by an internal consciousness beyond the senses; firmly established, he deviates not from the truth. Having attained this, he holds no other acquisition greater, and thus situated, even grievous misery does not shake him. Let it be known that dissolution of the deep union with misery is called *yoga*, and it should be practiced with whole-hearted determination.’¹⁷

Human Nature as Comprised of the Three *Guṇas*

The theory underlying the *Yoga* and *Sāṅkhya* schools considers nature to consist of three qualities or strands, called *guṇas*; the three qualities are named *sattva* representing goodness and transparency, *rajas* representing passion and desire, and *tamas* representing ignorance, indolence and darkness. The three *guṇas* comprise human nature, and they bind the soul to mind and matter, or to the subtle and gross bodies. As opposed to the soul which remains steady and unchanging, the *guṇas* constantly interact among themselves, and unite in various combinations; as such, sometimes goodness prevails, sometimes passion and sometimes darkness. As the *guṇas* are so dominant and govern every aspect of life, this world is sometimes

¹⁵ BG 6.24–26.

¹⁶ Second to third century CE.

¹⁷ BG 6.20–23.

called ‘the world of the *guṇas*’. As the three *guṇas* comprise human nature, they are reflected through each and every thought, word or deed. As such, the way one thinks, speaks and acts reflects the combination of the conditioning *guṇas*. This concept offers a unique division of human and even non-human existence which groups together various aspects of life, such as various psychological components, activity and adherence to duty, social grouping, eating habits and cosmological divisions. The *guṇa* of goodness is characterized by knowledge and happiness, and adherence to duty for the sake of duty; it represents the intellectual social group or the brahmins, is associated with fresh vegetarian food and, cosmologically, leads to the higher planets. The *guṇa* of passion is characterized by desire and attachment, and with adherence to duty for the sake of its fruits or for some ulterior gain; when mixed with a larger amount of goodness it represents the ruling class, and when mixed with a somewhat lesser amount of goodness, it represents the mercantile and farming class. It is associated with vegetarian food which agitates the senses, such as spicy or salty food, and cosmologically it leads to the middle planets. The *guṇa* of ignorance is characterized by darkness, indolence and madness and it involves the negligence of duty; it is more dominant among the productive social class, it is associated with non-vegetarian food and intoxicating drinks, and, cosmologically, it leads to the lower planets.

The *guṇas* may also be thought of as universal paths, on which the soul travels during its journey through *samsāra*. The path of goodness seems at first to be somewhat pale, but as one adheres to it, one gradually begins to experience happiness, stability and illumination. The path of passion is contrary, in that it seems very attractive and exciting at first, but as one adheres to it, one begins to experience distress and exhaustion. The lowest path, that of darkness, represents the lowest human condition; it is characterized by indolence, foolishness and even madness, and it leads to self-destruction. Despite the possibility of rationalizing these three paths, it may be rather difficult for the embodied to escape the influence or even bondage of the particular *guṇas* binding him or her. For the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the idea of the *guṇas* is fundamental and elaborate discussions on the nature of the *guṇas* take place, especially in Chapters 14, 17 and 18. The *Bhagavad Gītā* suggests a gradual elevation, by which one raises oneself from a lower *guṇa* to a higher one. For this purpose, various characteristics of the *guṇas*’ bondage are delineated, and these enable a process of self-examination or self-study. Consequently, one is able to change one’s habits for the purpose of raising oneself in this ladder of the *guṇas*. This idea of the *guṇas* is firmly tied with the ladder-like structure of the *Bhagavad Gītā*; as such, being established in the *guṇa* of goodness, one finds oneself adhering to *dharma*. In other words, when one adheres to *dharma* being motivated by some ulterior motives, one is considered to be governed by the two lower *guṇas*, but when one is able to rise to the *guṇa* of goodness, one practices following *dharma* for its own sake, in a disinterested manner, with no desire for its fruits. This is the highest position one may reach within what we call the ‘first storey’, and hence one continues to progress towards the ‘second storey’, towards a position ‘beyond the *guṇas*’.

Action and Beyond – the Principle of *Karma*

The *Yogic-Upaniṣadic* point of view¹⁸ which underlies the ‘second storey’ is somewhat complex in its perception of human action. As the soul is considered eternal, as the *guṇas* act and influence the soul beyond this life, similarly the concept of action is taken to have implications beyond the present life, having its roots in previous lives, and its consequences in future lives. In essence, every action is considered to bear not only immediate consequences, but long-term ones as well. As such, one may give charity to the needy and, as a result, be born in one’s next life to a rich family, consequently living an opulent life. Alternatively, one may commit some evil and as a result be born in a poor family and consequently live in difficult conditions. This may also reinforce the vision of the *guṇas* as universal paths; a person influenced by the *guṇa* of goodness gives charity, and this elevates him in his next life to a pious environment where he is well educated and, as such, continues to do good for others and be subsequently further elevated. Alternatively, a person influenced by the lower *guṇas* causes distress to others, and is consequently born in lower conditions or bodies, where a bad nature is enforced upon him and drags him further down the existential root. Although no doubt this concept may suggest the loss of free will and a somewhat fatalistic worldview, the *Bhagavad Gītā* firmly propounds the idea of free will, and underlying the entire conversation is the understanding that Arjuna can choose his own way or path. In other words, this suggests that despite the seeming fatalism sentenced by the *guṇas*, one still has a fair amount of free will, and is able to change one’s life course and existence.

Chapter 4 deals extensively with the subject matter of action and states: ‘What is action? What is inaction? Even the wise are confused in this matter. Now I shall explain to you this subject matter of action; having known this you shall be free from evil. One must know what action (*karma*) is, one must know what improper action (*vikarma*) is, and one must know what inaction (*akarma*) is, as profound indeed is the course of action.’¹⁹ Proper action is performed in accordance with one’s duty or *dharma* and bears good results, whereas improper action is contrary to one’s *dharmic* duties and this bears distressing results. Seen from this point of view, both good and bad acts ultimately bind one to continuous existence, as one will have to be born again in order to enjoy or suffer the results or the fruits of his or her actions. Alternatively, one is encouraged to perform a ‘clean’ or ‘pure’ action, which is considered to be inaction: the reason is that when this is done in the appropriate way, i.e. without regards to the fruits, accompanied by knowledge

¹⁸ Apparently the *Upaniṣads* contain also humanistic or *pravṛttic* sections furthering the ideal of *dharma*, and similarly, the *Yoga* traditions too contain ideals furthering humanistic ethics such as the stages of *yama* and *niyama*. Still, overall these traditions emphasize and further an attitude of renunciation or *nivṛtti*, as opposed, say, to traditions such as the *mīmāṃsā*, and as such they could be associated with the concept of the ‘second tier’.

¹⁹ BG 4.16–17.

and as an offering to the supreme, it does not bear consequential fruits in future lives, rather it leads to liberation. As such, it doesn't have the normal binding characteristics of action; this is the highest mode of action proposed at the end of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, in a statement which is sometimes considered to be the text's culmination and peak: 'Abandon all sorts of *dharmas* and take refuge in me alone, and I shall release you from all evils; do not fear.'²⁰ This raises a question in regards to the relinquishment of duty, or the external abstention from action; it seems that this is taken as a sort of improper action, and as such is liable to bear a bad result. The *Bhagavad Gītā* emphasizes the path of *karma yoga*, which is a *yoga* of action; accordingly, one undergoes the same *yogic* transformation through the performance of action or, more specifically, action according to *dharma*. As such, one examines one's own mode of action, and constantly endeavors to sublimate it; in this way, by adhering to one's duty, by constantly sublimating it and by refining one's inner motivations, one attains enlightenment through action. Arjuna is presented with various motivations for performing his duty and fighting; he may fight out of some utilitarian purposes, he may fight for the sake of duty, his fighting may be taken as a practice of *yoga*, and he may fight out of devotion to the supreme.

The *Bhagavad Gītā*'s Educational Doctrine

Having surveyed the two armies about to fight, Arjuna becomes despondent in his attempt to resolve the seemingly impossible moral dilemma facing him. At that time, he turns to Kṛṣṇa, his friend and charioteer, in a new way; he approaches Kṛṣṇa as a student approaches his *guru*, teacher or master, and declares: 'I am now your disciple and I fall at your feet; please instruct me!'²¹ The *guru* teaches his student through personal tutorship, while the student not only learns from the *guru* theoretical knowledge, but also serves his *guru* and aspires to please him. Chapter 4 refers to the *guru*-disciple relationship by saying: 'Know this by falling at the feet of the master, asking him questions and offering him service; in so doing, men of wisdom and vision of the truth will impart knowledge unto you.'²² This no doubt seems to be a very personal mode of knowledge transmission and it entails character-building and a transfer of values. The structure of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is composed not only of three tiers of reality, rather its other major component is a transformational ladder; the training process offered by the *guru* aspires to further a moral and spiritual transformation, and a gradual elevation along this ladder of values. The *Bhagavad Gītā* begins with the lowest stage of the ladder, represented by Arjuna's lamentation which appears in Chapter 1, it follows a gradual ascendance throughout the entire text, and this ascendance reaches its peak at the end of the last chapter, where Arjuna surrenders himself entirely to Kṛṣṇa.

²⁰ BG 18.66.

²¹ BG 2.7.

²² BG 4.34.

The question may be raised, what is considered to represent proper knowledge according to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, or what is it that the *guru* teaches? Also, are the various components of knowledge organized according to the three stories, too? Chapter 16 offers a list of the divine qualities, and opposes this with the demonic ones:

Fearlessness, purification of one's whole being, firmness in spiritual knowledge, generosity, self control and sacrifice, studying the *Veda*, austerity, righteousness, nonviolence, truthfulness, absence of anger, renunciation, tranquillity, avoiding vilification, compassion for all beings, absence of greed, gentleness, modesty, reliability, vigour, tolerance, fortitude, purity, absence of envy and pride – these are the qualities of one born to divine destiny, O Bhārata. Hypocrisy, arrogance, conceit, anger, harshness and ignorance – these are the qualities of one who is born to a demonic destiny.²³

From analysing this list, it seems that these represent what we may call 'first-storey educational ideals'. In other words, these are ideal qualities to be pursued while living in accordance with *dharma*, and their counterparts, the demonic qualities, are to be avoided. Chapter 13 offers a somewhat similar list of qualities, which represent knowledge:

Absence of pride and arrogance, nonviolence, forbearance, honesty, attendance upon the *guru*, purity, firmness, self control, lack of attraction to sense objects, absence of ego-notion, visioning the distress and evil of birth, death, old age and disease, detachment, aloofness from sons, wife, home and the like, constant equanimity toward desired and undesired events, single-minded devotion to me supported by *yoga*, preferring of solitary places and avoiding the crowds, constant contemplation of knowledge of the self, envisioning the purpose of knowledge concerned with the truth – all these are declared knowledge, whereas all else is ignorance.²⁴

This list seems to be aiming at a somewhat higher position along the ladder, and may be more compatible with the second and *yogic* storey. It is more introspective, emphasizes *yoga*, detachment, absence of ego and the vision of equality. Although it is not as explicit as these two lists, one may find the following verse to supply values which may be considered third-storey ideal qualities:

Those whose consciousness is absorbed in me, for whom I am everything, enlighten one another about me, constantly speaking of me; thus absorbed, they are delighted and content.²⁵

²³ *BG* 16.1–4.

²⁴ *BG* 13.7–11.

²⁵ *BG* 10.9.

This is a description of devotees immersed in the supreme; they are entirely absorbed in the supreme, they have no other object of interest, and they not only enlighten each other about the supreme, but take great pleasure in doing so. It may well be that implicit in this statement is the idea that this stage of being deeply immersed in the supreme represents not only the highest devotion, but also the highest degree of knowledge.

Bhakti

Bhakti, or devotion, is one of the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s major components; it represents a loving attitude towards the supreme who is generally thought of in the context of *bhakti* in personal terms. Looking deeper into the emotional state characterizing *bhakti*, one may discern love, devotion, a desire to please the Supreme Person, a sense of dependence upon him, a desire to glorify him and share this glorification with other devoted persons or *bhaktas*, a desire to serve the Supreme Lord through one's profession, a sense of loyalty to him, a desire to worship him and a desire to please him by offering various gifts such as flowers or fruits. Kṛṣṇa, who according to the *Bhagavad Gītā* is the Supreme Lord in Person, and who is the object of devotion, is not indifferent to his devotee, rather is very affectionate and protective towards him or her. As opposed to the general masculine voice dominating the *Bhagavad Gītā*, when it comes to devotion, the text specifically refers to female devotees, in a declaration which could be taken as groundbreaking for its time: 'Those who take refuge in me, be they of lowly origin, women, merchants and even servants; even they may attain the highest destination.'²⁶

Looking into the structure of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, it becomes evident that *bhakti* serves as a major, or maybe even *the* major, elevating force, which 'pulls', so to speak, or raises one in his transformational journey towards self-transcendence. Although there are other motivations for elevation along the transformational ladder such as the desire to attain true knowledge, the desire to become free from the implications of *karma*, and the desire for a *yogic* perfection, still, *bhakti* is perhaps the central source of inspiration for one to leave this world altogether. The idea of *bhakti* first appears explicitly towards the end of Chapter 3, where Kṛṣṇa urges Arjuna to fight in the mood of surrender unto him: 'Surrendering all your activities unto me with mind fixed on the highest self, without desire and avoiding possessiveness, cast lethargy aside and fight!'²⁷ Arjuna's reaction follows soon after, and at the beginning of Chapter 4 he asks about Kṛṣṇa's identity,²⁸ to which Kṛṣṇa answers that he is the Lord of all beings descending to uphold *dharma*. Following that, Kṛṣṇa encourages Arjuna in numerous places throughout the *Bhagavad Gītā*, to take refuge in him in a devotional mood. In general, Kṛṣṇa

²⁶ BG 9.32.

²⁷ BG 3.30.

²⁸ BG 4.4.

urges Arjuna to become his devotee in three basic ways or rather stages, which are compatible with the three tiers of the text. On the first tier, Kṛṣṇa encourages Arjuna to adhere to his work and duty according to *dharma*, and offer this work and its results unto him. An example for this kind of devotion is found at the end of Chapter 9: ‘Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give away and whatever austerity you may practice, O Kaunteya, do it as an offering unto me.’²⁹ Underlying this statement is the understanding that Arjuna is thinking in terms of ‘the world of *dharma*’; as such, he is encouraged to maintain his sense of human individuality, and to offer Kṛṣṇa the fruits of his work. A higher state of *bhakti* is that of *yogic* devotion exemplified by Kṛṣṇa’s conclusion of Chapter 4: ‘Therefore, O Bharata, you should cut the doubt residing in your heart which springs from nothing but ignorance, with your own sword of knowledge, resort to *yoga* and rise up to battle!’³⁰ This represents a ‘second storey’ position, where Arjuna is attempting to rise above his own worldly attachments, represented by the doubts residing in his heart, and obstructing him from hearing Kṛṣṇa clearly and following his instructions. Kṛṣṇa urges him to cut his doubts, which represent ignorance, with the sword of knowledge, and doing so by resorting to *yoga*. A verse which seems to carry a similar import, although with a slightly more personal emphasis, may be found in Chapter 8: ‘Therefore, at all times remember me and fight; with your mind and intelligence absorbed in me, you will come to me without doubt.’³¹ This verse also relates the external fighting to the internal one; the fighting here is considered to be a kind of a *yoga* practice, involving sense restraint, mental control and an inner meditation upon Kṛṣṇa. As such, it well exemplifies the two main components of the ‘second storey’ or the world of *yoga*; one the one hand, attempting to cut the bonds which hold one in embodied existence, and on the other hand, an attempt to connect or yoke oneself to the higher, supreme and spiritual reality, here represented by Kṛṣṇa himself. The ‘third storey’ *bhakti* may be exemplified by two of the *Bhagavad Gītā*’s concluding verses: ‘Always think of me, become my devotee, worship me and pay your homage to me, and thus you shall undoubtedly come to me; I promise you this as you are dear to me. Abandon all *dharmas* and take refuge in me alone, and I shall release you from all evils; do not fear.’³² These two verses represent a higher and more peaceful state of devotion to Kṛṣṇa; this is the state beyond both *dharma* and the internal *yogic* struggle, a state of intense but peaceful absorption in the mood of devotion, in which one always thinks of Kṛṣṇa in loving devotion, and is very dear to Kṛṣṇa. A more structured and condensed description of a descending ‘ladder of devotion’ appears in Chapter 12:

²⁹ BG 9.27.

³⁰ BG 4.42.

³¹ BG 8.7.

³² BG 18.65–66.

Fix your mind on me alone, and absorb your consciousness in me; thus you shall surely abide in me. If you cannot fix your consciousness steadily upon me, then aspire to reach me through repeated *yoga* practice, O Dhanañjaya. If you are incapable even of that, embrace the path of action, for which I am the highest goal, since by acting for me you shall attain perfection. But if you are even unable to follow this path of refuge in me through acts devoted to me, then give up the fruits of all your actions, thus restraining yourself. Knowledge is superior to practice, meditation is superior to knowledge, and relinquishing the fruits of actions is higher than meditation, as tranquillity soon follows such relinquishment.³³

The ladder begins with a complete absorption of one's consciousness in Kṛṣṇa which is a 'third tier' position. The next and lower stage is a direct *yoga* practice, and the next stage is working for Kṛṣṇa and offering him the fruits of labour; both of these stages represent a 'second tier' position. Lower than that is the 'first tier' position of relinquishing the fruits of labour; following that come meditation, knowledge and practice.

The Vision of the Supreme

The *Bhagavad Gītā* reaches its theological climax in Chapters 7 and 9, where the vision of the 'third storey' is articulated. Having lead Arjuna from the first storey to the second, and then to the third, Kṛṣṇa at last relinquishes the various logical arguments meant to convince Arjuna to rise higher and higher along the ladder of self-transcendence, and turns to a description of the spiritual reality. Kṛṣṇa speaks of his complex relationships with the spiritual souls and the world, moving between transcendence and immanence; as such, he describes two natures, the lower and the higher: 'Earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intellect and ego – these eight comprise my separated lower nature; but you should know that beside this lower nature, O mighty-armed one, there is another higher nature of mine, comprised of spirit souls, by which this world is sustained.'³⁴ Both of these natures are Kṛṣṇa's natures, but the first which is comprised of matter and mind is lower and separated, whereas the second which is comprised of spiritual souls is higher and apparently connected or deeply related to Kṛṣṇa, who himself supports the entire creation, as everything rests upon him just like pearls which are strung on a thread.³⁵ The relationships between the Supreme Person and the creation are complex and much has been said and written in this regards by the later great *Vedāntin* commentators, who articulated systematic theologies engaged with the dualism and the non-dualism of the world. The text continues to endow a vision:

³³ BG 12.8–12.

³⁴ BG 7.4–5.

³⁵ BG 7.7.

I pervade the entire world in my unmanifest form; all beings rest in me, but I do not rest in them, and yet all beings do not rest in me. See my mystic splendour! I sustain beings but rely not on them; my very self is the cause of their being. 6 As the great wind that goes everywhere is eternally contained within space, know that similarly all beings are contained in me.³⁶

This description is free from argumentative language, and it may be difficult to articulate it within common theological categories such as transcendence, immanence or pantheism. These statements do not seem to adhere to simple logic; as such, all beings rest in Kṛṣṇa, but at the same time all beings do not rest in him. The reason is that this description comprises a *darśana* or vision. This vision is not open to all, rather one must become a surrendered devotee of Kṛṣṇa in order to overcome his deluding power and maintain such a vision: ‘Divine indeed and difficult to penetrate is my deluding power, consisting of the three *guṇas*; but those who have surrendered unto me alone, they can transcend it.’³⁷ As such, one must overcome desires and become a surrendered devotee of Kṛṣṇa in order to absorb and maintain such a vision. Chapter 9 concludes with a statement which seems to represent the epitome of the entire *Bhagavad Gītā*, and this is a call for pure devotion: ‘Always think of me and become my devotee, worship me and pay homage unto me; thus yoked to me and intent on me as your highest goal, you shall come to me.’³⁸

Looking into the Structure of the *Bhagavad Gītā*

So far we have presented the *Bhagavad Gītā*’s structure in a somewhat simplistic manner; we may now examine it more carefully. The *Bhagavad Gītā* is a rich treatise containing numerous ideas fundamental to Hinduism; however, are these ideas consistent and coherent? Seen from a theological-philosophical perspective, the *Bhagavad Gītā* possesses a coherent and consistent theme, which could be followed from the beginning of the treatise to its end. This section aims at looking deeper into the *Bhagavad Gītā*’s structure which is founded on a three-tier concept of reality, and intertwined with a transformational ethical ladder. The idea of hierarchical reality suggests that reality is not unified, rather that it contains differing tiers or levels; there is a higher reality as well as a lower reality, and one must distinguish between the two. Moreover, each tier has its own unique language, terms and underlying assumptions. The ethical ladder is composed of various stages, and these enable one to rise from the lower tier of reality, to the intermediate tier and then to the higher one. Each of the ladder’s stages is defined by its underlying motivation; the more one undergoes transformation through the

³⁶ BG 9.4–6.

³⁷ BG 7.14.

³⁸ BG 9.34.

sublimation of one's motives for action, the more one transcends this ethical ladder. The ethical ladder is rooted at the lower stage of reality which represents worldly life, and as one gradually rises up the ladder, one makes progress towards the state of *mokṣa*.³⁹ This structure highlights the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s *jñāna* and *karma* aspects; the *jñāna* aspect is represented by the three-tier metaphysical concept, whereas the *karma* aspect is represented by the ladder of action's various grades. The three metaphysical tiers and the ladder of ethical stages are complementary; the division of reality into these three tiers highlights one's present condition in the lower tier, and one's goal which is the higher tier, whereas the ladder of action provides the practical means of gradually overcoming this gap step by step, by a process of self-transformation.

Hierarchical Reality in the *Bhagavad Gītā*

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is one of the triple foundations of *Vedānta*, and as such shares qualities characterizing a *Vedāntin* text, such as hierarchical grades of reality. In general, one can find two principal metaphysical positions in Indian philosophy; the realistic or direct position and the hierarchical position. The direct-realistic position assumes that reality is unified, that is, it does not contain divisions or layers; as such it is subject to direct human recognition and should not be submitted to different interpretations. The hierarchical position assumes that reality is not unified, rather contains differing levels or tiers. There is a higher or superior reality, and a lower or inferior reality, and one must distinguish between absolute and relative reality.⁴⁰ The two-levelled reality concept, the first empirical and conventional and the second absolute, the first changing and finite, and the second permanent and infinite, may be treated by applying the terminology '*dharma*' and '*mokṣa*'; the level of *dharma* is representative of the human or worldly condition, while the level of *mokṣa* is representative of the real or absolute condition.

Mentioning *dharma*, its opposite term, *adharma*, ought to be referred to as well. Ordinarily, *dharma* and *adharma* are considered opposite terms; however, seen from the point of view of *mokṣa*, both *dharma* and *adharma* are in an entirely different category. According to our terminology, both *dharma* and *adharma* represent the finite level, whereas *mokṣa* represents the infinite level. Simplifying terms, the embodied state representing both *dharma* and *adharma* is the world of *saṃsāra*, whereas the liberated state is of an entirely different nature called *mokṣa*. These two kinds of dichotomies – between *dharma* and *adharma*, and between *dharma* and *mokṣa*, can be understood through a somewhat graphic description: the dichotomy between *dharma* and *adharma* may be taken to be horizontal, as both existing within the same realm, whereas the dichotomy between both *dharma*

³⁹ The idea of the ladder is traditional. See; 'The Yoga Ladder' in: Bhūrījāna Dāsa, *Surrender Unto Me* (New Delhi, 1997), pp. 59–68.

⁴⁰ Shlomo Biderman, *Indian Philosophy – The Foundations* (Tel Aviv, 1980), p. 61.

and *adharma* and between *mokṣa*, may be taken to be vertical. This is so as both *dharma* and *adharma* are situated in the worldly or finite level, whereas *mokṣa* is situated in a completely different and higher level which is infinite and absolute. Besides the two tiers underlying the *Bhagavad Gītā* – which could be considered the finite and the infinite, or alternatively, *dharma* and *mokṣa* – there is a third tier, serving as an intermediate one connecting the two tiers, which would otherwise be unrelated to each other due to an insurmountable gap separating the two. The first tier represents *dharma*, and furthers proper human life. The second tier represents *yoga*, and furthers attempts to escape the viscous state of *samsāra* while gradually seeking hold of the state of *mokṣa*, and the third tier represents the state of *mokṣa* itself.

A question may arise, ‘How can these tiers be studied or distinguished?’ I suggest that in order to distinguish the tiers from each other, their underlying assumptions in terms of values and being may be examined.⁴¹ Thus in the first tier, that of *dharma*, the general rule in terms of value is to prosper; as such, worldly happiness and prosperity are desired and are good. In terms of being, the individual is defined in this tier as a human being or any other living being such as an animal, plant or other. In the second tier, the value of worldly prosperity is rejected in favour of non-attachment to the world and indifference to both worldly happiness and worldly distress, along with yoking oneself to a higher reality, that of *mokṣa*. In terms of being, the individual person does not consider himself any longer a human (or other) being but as an eternal spiritual soul bound by the laws of *samsāra*. Thus the individual’s subjective identity is not any more a human being, rather that of an eternal spiritual soul. In the third tier the ideal value is the experience of *brahmananda* or the bliss of *Brahman*; this realization takes place within the wider context of the Supreme Person who is the foundation underlying the immortal and imperishable *Brahman*. Thus, the indifference and non-attachment of the second tier are replaced by deep attachment to the Supreme Person, and deep love expressed by loving feelings towards him. As far as being is concerned, the spiritual soul of the second tier becomes not only pure existence and one with *Brahman*, but assumes the identity of a pure servant and a lover of the Supreme Person.

The three tiers represent internal mental states or attitudes. Thus, one who sees the world from the point of view of the first tier is convinced that he or she is a human being, and that his or her aim is to prosper. Similarly, one who sees the world from the point of view of the second tier is convinced that he is an embodied spiritual self, and that his aim is to get released from that condition. One who resides in the third tier may realize his oneness with *Brahman*, sees the supreme in person everywhere and aspires to serve and love him. I suggest the usage of a three-storey house as a metaphor, with each tier representing a storey or floor, and the ethical ladder serving as a staircase. Each storey or tier contains unlimited existential opportunities and paths; moreover, the residents of each floor have

⁴¹ Corresponding to the categories of ethics and ontology.

their own language, terms and underlying assumptions which are different from those of the residents of the other storeys. In a sense, the *Bhagavad Gītā* speaks in three different languages and constantly moves between the three tiers. Once recognizing the storey or tier from which the text is speaking, that section becomes intelligible and consistent with the rest of the treatise. On a more practical level, once recognizing one's ethical stage, it becomes apparent what the next stage of progress is. These distinctions may appear to be somewhat sharp whereas in the text itself there are connecting links between the storeys or tiers. However, this could possibly be compared to the study of grammar, where tables of roots and stems are articulated and discussed; although these linguistic forms are merely theoretical or structural, and do not appear in actual spoken language, they actually underlie it. Similarly the distinction between the tiers underlies the text although in the text itself these distinctions may not always be easy to inspect.

These ideas may be better demonstrated by a textual reference. As such, the following example demonstrates how the text shifts from the first tier to the second; when Arjuna argues against fighting the war, he does so from the position of the first tier:

When *adharma* overpowers the family its ladies become corrupt, O Kṛṣṇa, and when the women become corrupt there is miscegenation of classes. Surely miscegenation among classes leads both the clan's destroyers and the family itself to hell. The family ancestors fall too, deprived of their due offerings of sanctified food and water. As such, the evil deeds of the destroyers which lead to miscegenation among classes, wipe out eternal caste and family *dharma*. O Janārdana, we have heard that hell awaits those whose family *dharma* has been obliterated. Alas, resolved are we on committing a great evil, if we intend to kill our own people out of greed for royal pleasure. Better had I been killed on the battlefield, unarmed and unresisting, by Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons with weapons in their hands.⁴²

This passage may now be examined according to the two parameters previously mentioned – values and being. As far as values are concerned, it is clear that underlying Arjuna's speech is a desire for worldly prosperity; he believes that prosperity is good and objects to the war, which would cause the decline of *dharma*, the rise of *adharma* and the infliction of suffering upon all involved and beyond. As far as being is concerned, Arjuna thinks of himself and the others as human beings. In answering Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa doesn't address his concerns directly, but raises the conversation to the second tier and says:

O Dhṛtarāṣṭra, between both armies, Hṛṣīkeśa smiled, and thus addressed the dejected Arjuna. The blessed Lord said: while speaking words of wisdom, you lament for that which is not to be grieved for; wise are those who do not lament

⁴² BG 1.41–46.

either for the living or for the dead. Never was there a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor all these kings, nor in the future shall any of us cease to exist. As childhood, youth and old age befall the soul within this body, so it comes to acquire another body; the wise one is not swayed by illusion in this matter. Heat, cold, happiness and distress – sensual perception alone produces them all, and it is impermanent, coming and going; you should seek to endure them, O Bhārata. The wise one whom these do not disturb, who thus remains even tempered in both happiness and distress, is fit for immortality, O bull among men.⁴³

The values propounded here are utterly different. Kṛṣṇa does not accept the idea that prosperity in the world is good, but calls for indifference and endurance of both worldly happiness and worldly distress. These are taken to be impermanent, and to be produced by sensual perception alone. As far as being is concerned, Kṛṣṇa does not refer to the individuals present as human beings, rather he refers to them as spiritual souls or selves. In a sense, Kṛṣṇa doesn't directly answer Arjuna's doubts in regards to fighting, but performs a kind of a 'Copernical Revolution' by changing the conversation's underlying assumptions. Arjuna, on his part, argues that killing his relatives is bad; this is an obvious first-tier statement which assumes that people are subjected to death, and that death is to be avoided as far as possible for the sake of a prosperous life. Kṛṣṇa doesn't answer Arjuna's arguments, rather he shifts the conversation to a different tier or level altogether, and speaks out of different assumptions. From this higher point of view, Kṛṣṇa says that death doesn't exist at all; from his second-tier point of view, he doesn't see human beings subjected to death, rather he sees eternal spiritual souls, and as such doesn't see much logic in Arjuna's arguments. As far as values, Kṛṣṇa challenges Arjuna's idea that worldly prosperity and happiness are good and to be desired, by propounding the idea that it is indifference to both happiness and distress which is good and to be desired. Thus Kṛṣṇa speaks here out of a second-tier position.

The *Bhagavad Gītā*'s Transformational Aspects

Besides the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s theoretical aspects which may be considered in the category of *jñāna*, it has a practical side which may be considered to be in the realm of *karma*. The *Upaniṣads* and the *Brahmasūtras* are more theoretical, and as such do not offer much scope for developing a philosophy of conduct and spiritual self culture; however, the *Bhagavad Gītā* is the work in the realm of *Vedānta* that lays down the plan of life for realizing the ultimate good. This practical emphasis is not so fully present in the other two texts and, as such, without the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Advaita*, *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and *Dvaita* would be substantially impoverished and would

⁴³ BG 2.10–15.

lack the doctrine of the way of life.⁴⁴ As a practical scripture, the *Bhagavad Gītā* offers the means of crossing over the gap between the first tier, that of *dharma*, and the third tier, that of *mokṣa*. Mere following of *dharma* while avoiding *adharmā* is not sufficient to attain the stage of *mokṣa*, but a different type of endeavour or path is needed. This process or enterprise is sometimes called ‘self-realization’ and it involves a transformational path by which one progresses step by step, thus making advancement from the lower tiers to the higher ones. The question may now be raised, as to what means does the *Bhagavad Gītā* offer the practitioner who desires to make progress in the process of self-realization. In other words, if the gap between *dharma* and *mokṣa* is insurmountable, how is one expected to cross it, leaving behind the world of *saṃsāra*, and attaining the liberated realm of *mokṣa*? What practical means or system does the *Bhagavad Gītā* offer the individual or the community who aspires to practice this transformative path?

A major question raised in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is whether one should choose the path of action or, alternatively, the contemplative path. This question is clearly raised twice, at the beginning of Chapters 3 and 5, and is further discussed elsewhere.⁴⁵ The *Bhagavad Gītā* clearly recommends the path of action, which offers the means by which the performer is to be elevated all the way from the tier of *dharma* to the state of *mokṣa*. This uplifting action is performed according to one’s *dharma*, and continues to be carried out all along the way. Thus, Arjuna is encouraged all along his conversation with Kṛṣṇa to follow his *dharma* and fight. However, as the text progresses, he is encouraged to refine his motives for fighting; as such, the act of fighting is carried out in higher and higher inner states of consciousness. Thus, although externally one continues to carry out his prescribed duty, he undergoes an internal transformation through sublimation or purification of his motives for performing action. In this way a kind of ladder is formed, through which one rises higher and higher, from *dharma* to *mokṣa*, along the path of self-transcendence or self-realization. At the lowest stage, one’s actions are motivated by simple utilitarianism,⁴⁶ and as such, one in this stage acts for the purpose of directly achieving something for himself. Underlying the following reference is the notion of ‘simple utilitarianism’:

Beside that, people will be speaking of you as eternally infamous, and for one who has been honoured, dishonour is worse than death. The generals will assume that you have withdrawn from the battle out of fear, and thus, those who have once esteemed you highly will think little of you. Your ill wishers will speak many unspeakable words, thus ridiculing your capacity; what could be more distressful than this?⁴⁷

⁴⁴ S.S. Raghavacar, *Rāmānuja on the Gītā* (Calcutta, 1991), p. vii.

⁴⁵ *BG* 3.1–3, 5.1–2, 6.1.

⁴⁶ The term ‘Utilitarianism’ is applied here in its simple rendering, and not as a philosophical school associated with thinkers such as Bentham or Mill.

⁴⁷ *BG* 2.34–36.

Here Kṛṣṇa attempts to convince Arjuna to take arms, based upon an argument underlain by simple utilitarianism. He assumes that Arjuna aspires to accumulate gain such as fame, and argues that by withdrawing from the battle, Arjuna will lose his fame. The next argument is also utilitarian, but is somewhat higher in that it accepts scriptural authority; as such it accepts the idea that warriors who die in battle attain heaven. Thus it can be named the stage of ‘religious utilitarianism’ or, alternatively, ‘*dharmic* utilitarianism’. In other words, Arjuna is advised to follow *dharma* in order to achieve some end in this life or the next:

Happy are the *kṣatriyas* to whom such an opportunity to fight comes by good luck, as it opens heaven’s gates for them.⁴⁸

A stage still higher is following *dharma* for its own sake, or performing one’s duty for the sake of duty:

Fight for the sake of fighting, regarding alike happiness and distress, gain and loss, victory and defeat; thus you shall not incur evil.⁴⁹

The stage of ‘performing one’s duty for the sake of duty’ represents a pure mode of action, free from a desire for its fruits, and is one of the central teachings of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. However, it is still within the first storey as it doesn’t include an awareness of the ultimate good which is, according to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, release from *saṃsāra*. Those who embody this attitude reach the top of the first tier, and can progress further into the next stage, which is already in the second tier. The next stage rejects the value of the *Vedas*, which are considered to be engaged with worldly gains, in favour of a higher ideal – the attainment of *Brahman*:

As much value as there is in a well, when there is a flood of water on all sides, such is the value of all the *Vedas* for he who is a knower of *Brahman*.⁵⁰

This stage may be named ‘action for the sake of the highest good or *Brahman*’, and one who thus acts is situated in the second tier which is characterized by various *yoga* processes. He may act now in *karma yoga*, disinterested in the fruits of his actions, and may offer those fruits to the supreme, or alternatively may practice *jñāna yoga*, *aṣṭāṅga yoga* or *bhakti yoga*. However, these various *yoga* practices have the common goal of detaching oneself from worldly existence and attachments, and attaching oneself to the supreme. The ‘stage of *yoga*’ is thus characterized by enlightenment and renunciation:

⁴⁸ BG 2.32.

⁴⁹ BG 2.38.

⁵⁰ BG 2.46.

The enlightened renounces both good and evil deeds here in this world. Therefore, perform *yoga* for the sake of *yoga*, as *yoga* is the skill in action.⁵¹

Having perfected the stage of *yoga*, one finally elevates himself to the third tier, that of *mokṣa*, and becomes absorbed in *Brahman*, either in an impersonal way, such as in Śaṅkara's system, or through love of the Supreme Person, such as in Rāmānuja's system. Thus the impersonal version, of 'becoming one with *Brahman*', following Śaṅkara:

He whose happiness is within, whose pleasure is within, and his enlightenment too is within is actually a *yogī*; with his whole being absorbed in *Brahman*, he attains to extinction in *Brahman*.⁵²

However, the *Bhagavad Gītā* has dominant devotional characteristics, and the loving relations to be exchanged with the personal deity, serve as a stimuli for elevation in the ethical ladder of motives, as well as the highest achievement attainable for the devoted *bhakta*, following Rāmānuja's line; thus the personal version:

Always think of me and become my devotee, worship me and pay homage unto me; thus yoked to me and intent on me as your highest goal, you shall come to me.⁵³

The stages may be summarized as simple utilitarianism, *dharmic* utilitarianism, duty for its own sake, acting for the sake of the highest good or *Brahman*, the stage of *yoga*, and the state of *mokṣa* in its personal or impersonal version. Thus an 'ethical ladder of motives' is formed, whereas the higher one's motive for action is, the higher he is situated in the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s metaphysical structure. In this way the *Bhagavad Gītā* aspires to encompass the entire realm of existence, while encouraging all to ascend the ladder of motives, thus distancing oneself from *saṃsāra* and absorbing oneself in *Brahman*, either personally or impersonally. Following this structure, I believe that the *Bhagavad Gītā* can make sense as a coherent theological-philosophical treatise, firmly tied together as a single and unified text.

⁵¹ BG 2.50.

⁵² BG 5.24

⁵³ BG 9.34.