1. The Hesitation and Despondency of Arjuna

The first chapter provides the setting of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The opening verse places the setting of the *Gita* on the field of *dharma*. The setting of the *Gita* is thus placed in the context of a moral decision. Arjuna, representing everyman, is unable to determine the right thing to do. He does not know whether he should fight or not fight in order to regain the kingdom which rightfully belongs to him. The hesitation and despondency of Arjuna arises because of his concern for *dharma*. When he looks across the battlefield and sees his kinsmen and former teachers he appeals to the *dharma*, the religious law current in his time (40-44). To slay member of his own family would lead to the ruin of the family and the laws that keep the social structure intact. The inevitable result would be a mixing of caste, the worst of all evils.

2. Samkhya Theory and Yoga Practice

After Arjuna resolves not to fight, in verses 11-37 Krishna advances four reasons why Arjuna should fight. 1) The 'embodied self' is immortal and is not destroyed when the body is destroyed (12-25); 2) what is born must die and what dies must be born again (26-29); 3) it is the duty of the *kshatriya* to fight in a just war (31-33); 4) Arjuna would lose face in backing out of the battle at the last moment and would be accused of cowardice (34-37).

The rest of the chapter moves out of the immediate practical context into a more speculative sphere involving the contemplative life. The transition might seem abrupt, but what Krishna has to say about the contemplative life is the beginning of the teaching whereby Krishna explains how Arjuna can act on this field of *dharma* in such a way as to be free from the binding law of *karma*. Verses 39-53 are concerned with *buddhi-yoga*—the 'Yoga' of contemplative intellect. Krishna instructs Arjuna to free himself from dualistic thinking and from the threefold nature (the three *gunas*, *sattva*, *rajas*,and *tamas*, that constitute *prakriti*). Here Krishna also begins to instruct Arjuna in the secret of *karma-yoga*, to act without being attached to the fruit of action. Verses 54-72 describe the characteristics of the perfect sage, one who has all the senses under control, who has disciplined the mind and found peace.

3. Karma-Yoga or the Method of Work

Since Krishna has just spoken of the virtues of the contemplative life, Arjuna wonders why Krishna urges him on to this savage deed. Krishna responds with a fuller discussion of *karma-yoga*. In verses 3-7 Krishna explains that life is inherently caught up in action; it is in fact impossible to live at all without acting. Thus, Krishna maintains that renunciation of the world and abstention from action are not the paths to freedom. Having affirmed that all work should be done as a sacrifice, there follows a digression on the institution and utility of sacrifice and the origin of the whole world-process (8-16). In verses 19-26 Krishna exhorts Arjuna to act without attachment to the fruits of action. In so acting, Arjuna would be following the example of Krishna himself, and would also set an example for others. In 27-35 Krishna explains that the true Self is not the doer of the action anyway, for it is the modes of nature (*gunas*) which are acting. The chapter ends with an exhortation to know the self (*Atman*) (36-43).

4. THE WAY OF KNOWLEDGE

Krishna opens this chapter by saying that the doctrine He had expounded in the last chapter had already been revealed to him by Vivasvan, the primal ancestor of the human race (1-4). Krishna then explains that from time to time He must become incarnate whenever there is a decline in *dharma* (the theory of the *avatars*)(5-8). There follows an apparent digression in which Krishna explains that whoever understands his divine incarnation and the nature of his work is delivered from the round of rebirth (9-12). At this point Krishna once again speaks of the necessity of performing works in a spirit of total detachment just as He himself does (13-23). Then Krishna again identifies works with sacrifice. All those who work is a spirit of sacrifice will be released from the bonds of *karma* (23-32). The highest sacrifice, Krishna goes on to say, is the sacrifice of knowledge or wisdom. All actions (*karma*) will be reduced to ashes in the fire of wisdom (*jnana*) (33-42).

5. TRUE RENUNCIATION

This chapter opens with Arjuna still in doubt as to whether he should engage in action, that is, go to war, or pursue the way of contemplation. Thus he asks Krishna which path is the best: the path of renunciation of works or the path of unselfish performance of works. Krishna first responds by saying that of the two, the path of unselfish performance of works is better than the path of renunciation of works (2-3). But then Krishna goes on to say that actually the paths of renunciation and action are one for they lead to the same goal (4-5). The paths are one because the man of action must act in a spirit of renunciation. This path, however, requires the discipline of *yoga*, and thus the rest of the chapter is devoted to a description of the Yoga-disciplined (*yoga-yukta*) sage. The whole chapter is thus an elaboration of the description of the "perfect sage" at the end of chapter 2 (54-72). One interesting note: when Krishna describes the peace obtained by the *yogin* having attained the "beatitude of God" the phrase in Sanskrit is *Brahmanirvana*, which might be better translated as the "bliss of Brahman" or, literally, the "nirvana of Brahman" (25-26). This, of course, is the Buddhist ideal, which Krishna here absorbs.

6. THE TRUE YOGA

This chapter is a further elaboration of the previous one. Theory and practice, renunciation and the active life are not mutually exclusive, they complement each other, and the first is the culmination of the second (1-4). There are two selves in man. The higher one must be uplifted, the lower one suppressed (5-9). With this goal in mind, Krishna then begins to describe the practice of yoga meditation, both the physical and psychic aspects (10-17). The attempt to absorb Buddhism is again evident in verse 15 where a description of the liberated state includes "the supreme *nirvana*" which abides in Krishna. From the point of view of the *Gita*, the Buddhist *Nirvana* and the Brahman of the Upanishads, the two 'absolutes' of Indian religion, 'subsist in' Krishna, the personal and incarnate God. Verses 18-32 again describe the "perfect yogi" and the various ways in which liberation may be experienced. Arjuna, however, overawed by the

magnitude of the goal and the arduousness of the path, doubts whether he is up to the task. Krishna agrees that it is a difficult path, but assures Krishna that it is attainable, and that even if the final goal is not attained, the path can lead to a higher birth in the next life.

7. God and the World

According to Ramanuja, one of the classical commentators on the *Gita* (see pg 508), the first six chapters are devoted to the acquisition of true knowledge of the individual self as being immortal and of the 'stuff' of Brahman, while the next six are devoted to the knowledge of God. It could be said that in modern terms, the focus of the first six chapters is on psychology, while the next six concern theology. This may be only roughly true, but from this chapter until the tremendous theophany of God in chapter 11, the focus is clearly on Krishna as God, less with the realization of the Self.

Krishna begins by telling Arjuna that even though scarcely anyone comes to Krishna in truth, Arjuna can come to know Krishna in full through the practice of yoga (1-3). Then Krishna outlines the difference between the transitory and lower, and the higher and imperishable Nature of God (4-12). Then Krishna reveals that it is through the delusory power of *maya*, Krishna's divine power consisting of three modes of Nature, that human beings fail to recognize Krishna's true identity, which is above and beyond the veil of *maya.* Krishna is then the source of the constituents of Nature and therefore of good and evil (13-15). Krishna then discusses the different types of men who offer Him loving devotion and also the worshipers of other gods. At the end of the chapter Krishna announces that those who strive for deliverance and 'take refuge' in Him will know *Brahman*.

8. The Course of Cosmic Evolution

This chapter opens with Arjuna again asking about the nature of *Brahman*, the Self, the theory of *karma,* and how one is to know God at the time of death. Krishna again distinguishes between the indestructible nature of the Self and *Brahman*, and the mutable nature of all created beings. *Karma* is here identified as the creative force that brings all created beings into existence (3). Then Krishna tells Arjuna that those whose minds, disciplined in yoga, are fixed on Him at the time of death will attain liberation from rebirth (5-16). Krishna also speaks of the 'day and night of Brahma', the world cycles which continually emerge from the 'Unmanifest' (17-22). Krishna ends the chapter speaking of the two paths that are open to the soul at death.

9. The Lord is More than His Creation

Krishna here further elaborates what he had said in the previous chapter concerning his divine Nature. He is the highest *Brahman*, the Unmanifest pervading all the universe, the highest Person of the Upanishads. He is the source of all created beings, yet transcending all. "All beings abide in Me but I do not abide in them" (4). He creates the world out of his own

(lower) Nature (*prakriti*) though He remains forever unaffected by this creative activity (4-10). Krishna then repeats that those who come to know Him as God, as the source of all beings, those who worship Him with undistracted mind will reach the highest (11-25). Krishna emphasizes that whatever one does, one should do it as a sacrifice, in worship of God. Only then is one freed from the binding law of *karma* (27). Loving devotion wipes out all sin and, unlike the religion of the Vedas, is open to women and all castes (32).

10. God is the Source of All: To Know Him is to Know All

This chapter begins with Krishna further elaborating on His identity as the source of all, the source of the gods, of all the great sages, and of the different states of being (1-11). Those who know Krishna's divine identity, those who worship Krishna with constant love and devotion (*bhakti yoga*) attain supreme enlightenment in union with God. After acknowledging Krishna's identity as Supreme *Brahman*, Arjuna asks that Krishna further reveal his divine manifestations so that he can better meditate on Him (12-18). Krishna reveals that he is "the self seated in the hearts of all creatures . . . the beginning, the middle and the very end of beings" (20). In the rest of the chapter Krishna reveals Himself as the foremost representative of various classes of being and as the specific virtues of virtuous men. He ends by saying that he supports the whole universe with but a fraction of Himself.

11. The Lord's Transfiguration

In this chapter the *Bhagavad Cita* comes to a climax as Krishna reveals Himself in all his terrifying majesty. After hearing about all of Krishna's powers, Arjuna now aks to see Krishna's divine form. Krishna bestows upon Arjuna a supernatural or 'celestial eye' so that Arjuna may see Him (5-8). The narrative now returns to Samjaya who describes to Dritarashtra the revelation of Krishna's divine form to Arjuna. The rest of the chapter relays Samjaya's account of the tremendous vision in which the entire universe in all its multiplicity is seen as Krishna's body, and all of existence is seen as rushing headlong like a river into Krishna's flaming mouths. Krishna reveals Himself as Time, the destroyer of worlds. Krishna again exhorts Arjuna to fight, to slay all his enemies. Arjuna can only be the occasion, for they are already slain by Krishna (32-35). In terrified ecstasy Arjuna acknowledges Krishna as the God of gods, the Supreme resting place of the world (35-46). As Arjuna is no longer able to behold the tremendous vision, Krishna returns to his previous human form, and ends by telling Arjuna that whoever worships Him, without attachment, and free from enmity toward all creatures, will be united with Him.

12. Worship of the Personal Lord is Better than Meditation of the Absolute

This chapter opens with what may be the biggest anticlimax in literature. Having actually *seen* Krishna's divine form, Arjuna now wonders whether those who worship Him (as personal but supreme God) or those who worship Him as the Imperishable and Unmanifested (as impersonal *Brahman*) have the highest knowledge. Krishna responds that He prefers the

former but that the latter path, even though more difficult, eventually leads to the same goal (2-5). Krishna then enumerates many approaches toward liberation. Krishna recommends that Arjuna consign all works to Him, with his thoughts always fixed on Him. In this way he will be most quickly and surely delivered from death-bound existence. If he is unable to do this, there are other means (7-12). The rest of the chapter is devoted to an enumeration of the classes of people who are dear to Krishna, all of them characterized by the virtues of self-control, dispassion, indifference, and loving devotion to God.

13. The Body called the Field, The Soul called the Knower of the Field, and the Discrimination Between Them

In this chapter Krishna elaborates on the difference between *Prakriti*, (material nature) here referred to as 'the field' and *Purusha*, (Spirit or Self) here referred to as 'the Knower of the field.' The field is the body and everything that derives from material Nature: the five elements, the ego (sense of self, understanding (*buddhis*), the senses and the objects of the senses, etc. (1-6). There follows a discussion on knowledge and the real object of knowledge (7-12). Surprisingly, knowledge is first identified with a series of Buddhistic virtues—humility, non-violence, self-restraint, detachment, etc. To these is added *bhakti*—loving devotion to God. It also seems surprising that the real object of knowledge is not the personal God but the abstract 'Supreme *Brahman*.' It is clear, however, that knowledge of *Brahman* is to be supplemented with loving devotion to God. The next section (13-18) then describes the Knower of the field, *Purusha*, without and within all beings. There is a further elaboration of the difference between *Prakriti* and *Purusha*, with the conclusion that whoever knows *Purusha* and *Prakriti* along with its *gunas* attains release from rebirth (19-23). Different paths to salvation are then enumerated: meditation (*dhyana*), the path of knowledge (*Samkhya-yoga*), the path of works (*karma-yoga*). Others, ignorant of these yogas, achieve salvation through worship. Finally, Krishna again reminds Arjuna that all actions are done by *Prakriti*, the Self is only the passive observer of the field of action.

14. The Mystical Father of All Beings

This chapter begins with an account of creation in purely sexual terms. Krishna, the eternal male (*Purusha*), casts the seed into the womb that is great *brahma* (*Prakriti*) (1-4). There follows a detailed discussion of the three *gunas*—which, from this point on until the concluding chapter, become the primary focus of Krishna's discourse. The three *gunas* are all 'born of *prakriti*,' and all bind one to rebirth. The highest *guna* is *sattva*, associated with goodness, purity, illumination, health. It binds one by attachment to happiness and knowledge. Next is *rajas*, associated with attraction, craving, attachment. It binds by attachment to action. Finally, there is *tamas*, associated with dullness, ignorance, delusion. It binds through attachment to ignorance and sleep. It is explained how the *gunas* lead to knowledge, greed, and negligence. It is only when the embodied soul rises above all three *gunas* that one is freed from rebirth (20). The

concluding section describes the one who is beyond the three *gunas*, one who stands apart from them, unmoving, unperturbed by pleasure or pain (21-27).

15. The Tree of Life

This chapter begins with a description of the 'Cosmic Tree' which is a figure of *samsara*, the endless round of birth and death. Cutting down the tree with non-attachment one find refuge in the 'Primal Person' that is the source of the cosmic process (1-6). Krishna then describes the process of transmigration. An embodied person is a fragment or particle of God that attaches itself to mind and senses. Most do not see the indwelling soul, that is like the sun illuminating the whole world (7-15). The final section describes the 'Supreme Person,' that which surpasses all the perishable and imperishable (16-20).

16. The Nature of the Godlike and the Demoniac Mind

The focus of the chapter is morality. Krishna expounds on the difference between those born of divine nature and those born of demoniac nature. Krishna begins by describing the virtues of one born of divine nature (1-7). The remainder of the chapter describes the faults of the one born of evil nature: an atheist, full of hypocrisy, excessive pride, arrogance. Motivated by lust, anger, desire for wealth, they are deluded by ignorance and face birth after birth in lower incarnations. The chapter ends with a discussion of the 'triple gate of hell' lust, anger, and greed which lead one to lower and lower births.

17. The Three Modes Applied to Religious Phenomena

In this chapter Krishna reviews how the three *gunas*, the constituents of Nature, operate in the domains of faith, food, sacrifice, asceticism, and alms-giving. Every embodied soul is determined by its nature, its particular configuration of the *gunas*, as to what type of deities are worshiped (2-6). All foods can be categorized according to the *gunas*. Foods that are sweet and healthful, producing vitality and joy are *sattva*. Those that are bitter, sour, pungent, producing pain, grief, and disease are *rajas*. Foods that are stale, putrid, unclean are *tamas*. Sacrifice that is offered with no thought of reward is *sattva*. Sacrifice offered with expectation of reward is *rajas*. Sacrifice which does not conform to law, which is empty of faith is *tamas*. The practice of penance or asceticism which is performed without expectation of reward is *sattva*. That practiced in order to gain respect is *rajas*. Extreme asceticism or self-torture is *tamas*. Gifts given with no expectation of return are *sattva*. Gifts given with hope of return are *rajas*. Gifts given inappropriately are *tamas*. The chapter ends with a discussion of the mystical utterance : *Aum Tat Sat*, —Om, That, It Is, represents the quintessence of Reality.

18. Conclusion

The last chapter falls into two distinct parts. Verses 1-40 continue the discussion of the three *gunas* in the previous chapter. In the first section (1-17), Krishna summarizes his teaching on renunciation and the performance of duty. Since it is impossible for an embodied person to

abstain from work altogether, one must perform one's duty, but without any attachment to the fruit of action. Based again on the three *gunas*, Krishna explains three kinds of knowledge, three kinds of work, three kinds of doers, three kinds of understanding, three kinds of steadiness, and three kinds of happiness. Sections 40-45 deal with the duties of the four classes of society. Verses 46-48 are a transition leading the reader back from the sphere of 'action' to that of 'wisdom.' From 49-66 Krishna repeats and summarizes his whole doctrine of salvation culminating in the love of man for God and God's love for man. Finally, the concluding section returns from the metaphysical heights of Krishna's new theology to the field of Kurukshetra where Arjuna's doubts are dispelled.

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This summary is extracted from the commentary by R.C. Zaehner in his translation of the text:

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