

# the Bhagavad-gita

KRISHNA'S COUNSEL IN TIME OF WAR

*With an Introduction and an Afterword by  
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## DISCIPLINE OF ACTION

*Arjuna*

If you think understanding  
is more powerful than action,  
why, Krishna, do you urge me  
to this horrific act?

1

You confuse my understanding  
with a maze of words;  
speak one certain truth  
so I may achieve what is good.

2

*Lord Krishna*

Earlier I taught the twofold  
basis of good in this world—  
for philosophers, disciplined knowledge;  
for men of discipline, action.

3

A man cannot escape the force  
of action by abstaining from actions;  
he does not attain success  
just by renunciation.

4

No one exists for even an instant  
without performing action;  
however unwilling, every being is forced  
to act by the qualities of nature.

5

When his senses are controlled  
but he keeps recalling  
sense objects with his mind,  
he is a self-deluded hypocrite.

6

When he controls his senses  
with his mind and engages in the discipline  
of action with his faculties of action,  
detachment sets him apart.

7

Perform necessary action;  
it is more powerful than inaction;  
without action you even fail  
to sustain your own body.

8

Action imprisons the world  
unless it is done as sacrifice;  
freed from attachment, Arjuna,  
perform action as sacrifice!

9

When creating living beings and sacrifice,  
Prajapati, the primordial creator, said:  
"By sacrifice will you procreate!  
Let it be your wish-granting cow!"

10

Foster the gods with this,  
and may they foster you;  
by enriching one another,  
you will achieve a higher good.

11

Enriched by sacrifice, the gods  
will give you the delights you desire;  
he is a thief who enjoys their gifts  
without giving to them in return."

12

Good men eating the remnants  
of sacrifice are free of any guilt,  
but evil men who cook for themselves  
eat the food of sin.

13

Creatures depend on food,  
food comes from rain,  
rain depends on sacrifice,  
and sacrifice comes from action.

14

Action comes from the spirit of prayer,  
whose source is OM, sound of the imperishable;  
so the pervading infinite spirit  
is ever present in rites of sacrifice.

15

He who fails to keep turning  
the wheel here set in motion  
wastes his life in sin,  
addicted to the senses, Arjuna.

16

But when a man finds delight  
within himself and feels inner joy  
and pure contentment in himself,  
there is nothing more to be done.

17

He has no stake here  
in deeds done or undone,  
nor does his purpose  
depend on other creatures.

18

Always perform with detachment  
any action you must do;  
performing action with detachment,  
one achieves supreme good.

19

Janaka and other ancient kings  
attained perfection by action alone;  
seeing the way to preserve  
the world, you should act.

20

Whatever a leader does,  
the ordinary people also do.  
He sets the standard  
for the world to follow.

21

In the three worlds,  
there is nothing I must do,  
nothing unattained to be attained,  
yet I engage in action.

22

What if I did not engage  
relentlessly in action?  
Men retrace my path  
at every turn, Arjuna.

23

These worlds would collapse  
if I did not perform action;  
I would create disorder in society,  
living beings would be destroyed.

24

As the ignorant act with attachment  
to actions, Arjuna,  
so wise men should act with detachment  
to preserve the world.

25

No wise man disturbs the understanding  
of ignorant men attached to action;  
he should inspire them,  
performing all actions with discipline.

26

Actions are all effected  
by the qualities of nature;  
but deluded by individuality,  
the self thinks, "I am the actor."

27

When he can discriminate  
the actions of nature's qualities  
and think, "The qualities depend  
on other qualities," he is detached.

28

Those deluded by the qualities of nature  
are attached to their actions;  
a man who knows this should not upset  
these dull men of partial knowledge.

29

Surrender all actions to me,  
and fix your reason on your inner self;  
without hope or possessiveness,  
your fever subdued, fight the battle!

30

Men who always follow my thought,  
trusting it without finding fault,  
are freed  
even by their actions.

31

But those who find fault  
and fail to follow my thought,  
know that they are lost fools,  
deluded by every bit of knowledge.

32

Even a man of knowledge  
behaves in accord with his own nature;  
creatures all conform to nature;  
what can one do to restrain them?

33

Attraction and hatred are poised  
in the object of every sense experience;  
a man must not fall prey  
to these two brigands lurking on his path!

34

Your own duty done imperfectly  
is better than another man's done well.  
It is better to die in one's own duty;  
another man's duty is perilous.

35

*Arjuna*

Krishna, what makes a person  
commit evil  
against his own will,  
as if compelled by force?

36

*Lord Krishna*

It is desire and anger, arising  
from nature's quality of passion;  
know it here as the enemy,  
voracious and very evil!

37

As fire is obscured by smoke  
and a mirror by dirt,  
as an embryo is veiled by its caul,  
so is knowledge obscured by this.

38

Knowledge is obscured  
by the wise man's eternal enemy,  
which takes form as desire,  
an insatiable fire, Arjuna.

39

The senses, mind, and understanding  
are said to harbor desire;  
with these desire obscures knowledge  
and confounds the embodied self.

40

Therefore, first restrain  
your senses, Arjuna,  
then kill this evil  
that ruins knowledge and judgment.

41

Men say that the senses are superior  
to their objects, the mind superior to the senses,  
understanding superior to the mind;  
higher than understanding is the self.

42

Knowing the self beyond understanding,  
sustain the self with the self.  
Great Warrior, kill the enemy  
menacing you in the form of desire!

43

## KNOWLEDGE

*Lord Krishna*

I taught this undying discipline  
to the shining sun, first of mortals,  
who told it to Manu, the progenitor of man;  
Manu told it to the solar king Ikshvaku.

1

Royal sages knew this discipline,  
which the tradition handed down,  
but over the course of time  
it has decayed, Arjuna.

2

This is the ancient discipline  
that I have taught to you today;  
you are my devotee and my friend,  
and this is the deepest mystery.

3

*Arjuna*

Your birth followed the birth  
of the sun;  
how can I comprehend that you taught it  
in the beginning?

4

*Lord Krishna*

I have passed through many births  
and so have you;  
I know them all,  
but you do not, Arjuna.

5

Though myself unborn, undying,  
the lord of creatures, I fashion nature,  
which is mine, and I come into being  
through my own magic.

6

Whenever sacred duty decays  
and chaos prevails,  
then, I create  
myself, Arjuna.

7

To protect men of virtue  
and destroy men who do evil,  
to set the standard of sacred duty,  
I appear in age after age.

8

He who really knows my divine  
birth and my action, escapes rebirth  
when he abandons the body—  
and he comes to me, Arjuna.

9

Free from attraction, fear, and anger,  
filled with me, dependent on me,  
purified by the fire of knowledge,  
many come into my presence.

10

As they seek refuge in me,  
I devote myself to them;  
Arjuna, men retrace  
my path in every way.

11

Desiring success in their actions,  
men sacrifice here to the gods;  
in the world of man  
success comes quickly from action.

12

I created mankind in four classes,  
different in their qualities and actions;  
though unchanging, I am the agent of this,  
the actor who never acts!

13

I desire no fruit of actions,  
and actions do not defile me;  
one who knows this about me  
is not bound by actions.

14

Knowing this, even ancient seekers  
of freedom performed action—  
do as these seers  
did in ancient times.

15

What is action? What is inaction?  
Even the poets were confused—  
what I shall teach you of action  
will free you from misfortune.

16

One should understand action,  
understand wrong action,  
and understand inaction too;  
the way of action is obscure.

17

A man who sees inaction in action  
and action in inaction  
has understanding among men,  
disciplined in all action he performs.

18

The wise say a man is learned  
when his plans lack constructs of desire,  
when his actions are burned  
by the fire of knowledge.

19

Abandoning attachment to fruits  
of action, always content, independent,  
he does nothing at all  
even when he engages in action. 20

He incurs no guilt if he has no hope,  
restrains his thought and himself,  
abandons possessions,  
and performs actions with his body only. 21

Content with whatever comes by chance,  
beyond dualities, free from envy,  
impartial to failure and success,  
he is not bound even when he acts. 22

When a man is unattached and free,  
his reason deep in knowledge,  
acting only in sacrifice,  
his action is wholly dissolved. 23

The infinite spirit is the offering,  
the oblation it pours into infinite fire,  
and the infinite spirit can be reached  
by contemplating its infinite action. 24

Some men of discipline offer  
sacrifice only to the gods;  
others sacrifice with oblation  
in the fire of infinite spirit. 25

Some offer senses such as hearing  
in the fires of restraint;  
others offer sound and other objects  
in the fires of the senses. 26

Others offer all actions of the senses  
and all actions of breath  
in the fire of discipline kindled  
by knowledge—the mastery of one's self. 27

Ascetics who keep strict vows  
sacrifice with material objects,  
through penance, discipline,  
study of sacred lore, and knowledge. 28

Others sacrifice by suspending  
the cycle of vital breath,  
the flow of inhaling and exhaling,  
as they practice breath control. 29

Others restricting their food  
offer breaths in vital breaths;  
all these understand sacrifice  
and in sacrifice exhaust their sins. 30

Men who eat remnants of sacrifice  
attain the timeless infinite spirit;  
what is this world or the next  
for a man without sacrifice, Arjuna? 31

Many forms of sacrifice  
expand toward the infinite spirit;  
know that the source of them all  
is action, and you will be free. 32

Sacrifice in knowledge is better  
than sacrifice with material objects;  
the totality of all action  
culminates in knowledge, Arjuna, 33

Know it by humble submission,  
by asking questions, and by service;  
wise men who see reality  
will give you knowledge.

34

Arjuna, when you have realized this,  
you will not descend into delusion again;  
knowledge will let you see creatures  
within yourself and so in me.

35

Even if you are the most evil  
of all sinners,  
you will cross over all evil  
on the raft of knowledge.

36

Just as a flaming fire reduces  
wood to ashes, Arjuna,  
so the fire of knowledge  
reduces all actions to ashes.

37

No purifier equals knowledge,  
and in time  
the man of perfect discipline  
discovers this in his own spirit.

38

Faithful, intent, his senses  
subdued, he gains knowledge;  
gaining knowledge,  
he soon finds perfect peace.

39

An ignorant man is lost, faithless,  
and filled with self-doubt;  
a soul that harbors doubt has no joy,  
not in this world or the next.

40

Arjuna, actions do not bind  
a man in possession of himself,  
who renounces action through discipline  
and severs doubt with knowledge.

41

So sever the ignorant doubt  
in your heart with the sword  
of self-knowledge, Arjuna!  
Observe your discipline! Arise!

42

## RENUNCIATION OF ACTION

*Arjuna*

Krishna, you praise renunciation  
of actions and then discipline;  
tell me with certainty  
which is the better of these two.

1

*Lord Krishna*

Renunciation and discipline in action  
both effect good beyond measure;  
but of the two, discipline in action  
surpasses renunciation of action.

2

The man of eternal renunciation  
is one who neither hates nor desires;  
beyond dualities,  
he is easily freed from bondage.

3

Simpletons separate philosophy  
and discipline, but the learned do not;  
applying one correctly, a man  
finds the fruit of both.

4

Men of discipline reach the same place  
that philosophers attain;  
he really sees who sees philosophy  
and discipline to be one.

5

Renunciation is difficult to attain  
without discipline;  
a sage armed with discipline  
soon reaches the infinite spirit.

6

Armed with discipline, he purifies  
and subdues the self, masters his senses,  
unites himself with the self of all creatures;  
even when he acts, he is not defiled.

7

Seeing, hearing, touching, smelling,  
eating, walking, sleeping, breathing,  
the disciplined man who knows reality  
should think, "I do nothing at all."

8

When talking, giving, taking,  
opening and closing his eyes,  
he keeps thinking, "It is the senses  
that engage in sense objects."

9

A man who relinquishes attachment  
and dedicates actions to the infinite spirit  
is not stained by evil,  
like a lotus leaf unstained by water.

10

Relinquishing attachment,  
men of discipline perform action  
with body, mind, understanding, and senses  
for the purification of the self.

11

Relinquishing the fruit of action,  
the disciplined man attains perfect peace;  
the undisciplined man is in bondage,  
attached to the fruit of his desire.

12

Renouncing all actions with the mind,  
the masterful embodied self  
dwells at ease in its nine-gated fortress—  
it neither acts nor causes action.

13

The lord of the world  
does not create agency or actions,  
or a union of fruits with actions;  
but his being unfolds into existence.

14

The lord does not partake  
of anyone's evil or good conduct;  
knowledge is obscured by ignorance,  
so people are deluded.

15

When ignorance is destroyed  
by knowledge of the self,  
then, like the sun, knowledge  
illumines ultimate reality.

16

That becomes their understanding,  
their self, their basis, and their goal,  
and they reach a state beyond return,  
their sin dispelled by knowledge.

17

Learned men see with an equal eye  
a scholarly and dignified priest,  
a cow, an elephant, a dog,  
and even an outcaste scavenger.

18

Men who master the worldly world  
have equanimity—  
they exist in the infinite spirit,  
in its flawless equilibrium.

19

He should not rejoice in what he loves  
nor recoil from what disgusts him;  
secure in understanding, undeluded, knowing  
the infinite spirit, he abides in it.

20

Detached from external contacts,  
he discovers joy in himself;  
joined by discipline to the infinite spirit,  
the self attains inexhaustible joy.

21

Delights from external objects  
are wombs of suffering;  
in their beginning is their end,  
and no wise man delights in them.

22

A man able to endure  
the force of desire and anger  
before giving up his body  
is disciplined and joyful.

23

The man of discipline has joy,  
delight, and light within;  
becoming the infinite spirit,  
he finds the pure calm of infinity.

24

Seers who can destroy their sins,  
cut through doubt, master the self,  
and delight in the good of all creatures  
attain the pure calm of infinity.

25

The pure calm of infinity  
exists for the ascetic  
who disarms desire and anger,  
controls reason, and knows the self.

26

He shuns external objects,  
fixes his gaze between his brows,  
and regulates his vital breaths  
as they pass through his nostrils.

27

Truly free is the sage who controls  
his senses, mind, and understanding,  
who focuses on freedom  
and dispels desire, fear, and anger.

28

Knowing me as the enjoyer  
of sacrifices and penances, lord of all worlds,  
and friend of all creatures,  
he finds peace.

29