

What does the Bhagavad Gita teach?

In this text we want to show the main thoughts and themes the Bhagavad Gita deals with. Our aim is to point out the answers the “Song of the Lord”¹ gives to such important questions as “How can we reach liberation from all evil and sins?, Which image should we have about God?, What does it mean to love God?, What is the importance of meditation?,” and others. We will not write a comprehensive summary but stress those issues which are essential to understand the message of this book and to assess them from a Christian point of view.

Setting and context of the Bhagavad Gita

It is an episode in the 6th book of India’s great epic, the Mahabharata. The main story of this poem is the war between the Kauravas and their cousins, the Pandavas. Just at the beginning of the battle Arjuna, the bravest warrior of the Pandavas, refuses to fight and Krishna, the incarnation of the great god Vishnu and now the helper of the Pandavas as a charioteer of Arjuna, endeavors to convince him to fulfill his caste-duty. That’s the starting point of the Bhagavad Gita in which Krishna explains to Arjuna the most profound things about man and god.²

Krishna explains why Arjuna should fight against his relatives in the war: fulfilling one’s duty

Krishna has come as the incarnated god Vishnu to set up righteousness again

For the protection of the good, for the destruction of evil-doers, for the setting up of the law of righteousness I come into being age after age. (Bhagavad Gita 4:8)³

First of all he argues that the individual self is immortal and cannot be killed.

Never is it born nor dies; never did it come to be nor will it ever come to be again: unborn, eternal, everlasting is this [self]⁴,—primeval. It is not slain when the body is slain. (Bhagavad Gita 2:20)

Furthermore, reincarnation is a selfevident fact, Krishna says in chapter 2:

For sure is the death of all that is born, sure is the birth of all that dies: so in a matter that no one can prevent you have no cause to grieve. (Bhagavad Gita 2:27)

He reminds the warrior Arjuna of his caste-duty ...

Likewise consider your own [caste-]duty, then too you have no cause to quail (means: to feel frightened); for better than a fight prescribed by law is nothing for a man of the princely class. (Bhagavad Gita 2:31)

... and his honour in front of other fighters.

From fear he fled the battlefield—so will they think of you, the mighty charioteers. Greatly esteemed by them before, you will bring contempt upon yourself. (Bhagavad Gita 2:35)

1 Bhagavad Gita literally means “Song of the Lord.”

2 But as we learn from the 14th book of the Mahabharata Arjuna proves unworthy of receiving the divine mystery because he forgot every single word of the Gita and therefore Krishna had to repeat it.

3 Out of numerous translations we have chosen R.C. Zaehner’s because of its objectivity. If not otherwise mentioned all quotations are taken from his book: The Bhagavad Gita, with a commentary based on the original sources, R.C. Zaehner, Oxford University Press 1969.

4 Text in these brackets is added for easier understanding.

Interestingly Krishna never argues with the fact that this war is a righteous fight against evil people. This fits the fact that the unjust leader of the Kauravas Duryodhana, who rejected Krishna, entered paradise because he died in the battle facing the enemy and thus fulfilled his duty⁵. Can someone who is an enemy of God, acting unrighteously, make his way into paradise only because he fulfilled his caste-duty? Shouldn't our deeds rather be determined by God who wants to show us his will in every situation?

Renunciation of the fruits of works through spiritual exercise

The Gita then elaborates on the thought of detachment and renunciation which is emphasised again and again as means to gain wisdom—an idea that occurs also in Buddhism. Arjuna should not think of the consequences or fruits of his works, he should act free from the effect of deeds which bind him.

Stand fast in Yoga, surrendering attachment; in success and failure be the same and then get busy with your works. (Bhagavad Gita 2:48)

Yoga (see next section) is the practice by which one gains sameness with everything that is Brahman⁶. Chapter 2 then speaks about the liberation of reincarnation through renouncing the fruits of works.

For those wise men who are integrated by the soul, who have renounced the fruit that is born of works, these will be freed from the bondage of [re-]birth and fare to that region that knows no ill. (Bhagavad Gita 2:51)

Krishna points at himself as an example of acting without attachment.

Works can never affect Me. I have no yearning for their fruits. Whoso would know that this is how I am will never be bound by works. (Bhagavad Gita 4:14)

The ultimate goal is to achieve Nirvana, to reach the fixed, stillstate of Brahman which is beyond space and time, detached from any influence, desires and even every emotion and thought. That's the state of highest joy according to the Gita.

Winning some pleasant thing [the sage] will not rejoice, nor shrink disquietened when the unpleasant comes his way: steadfast-and-still his soul, [all] unconfused, he will know Brahman, in Brahman [stilled] he'll stand. [His] self detached from contacts with the outside world, in [him]self he finds his joy, [his]self in Brahman integrated by spiritual exercise, he finds unflinching joy. (Bhagavad Gita 5:20–21)

Whoever's self is controlled because his soul is steadfast and still, finds joy and light within himself.

His joy within, his bliss within, his light within, the man who-is-integrated-in-spiritual-exercise becomes Brahman and draws nigh (means: near) to Nirvana that is Brahman too. (Bhagavad Gita 5:24)

In this verse the Buddhist term "Nirvana" is equated with "Brahman." On the one hand the Buddhist Nirvana is the destruction of life as we know it. On the other hand it is understood as a state of liberation, an abolishment of individuality. The Gita though goes even further than this. In the last verse of chapter 5 it says that by knowing Krishna, which hints at a relationship with him as a personal God, one can find peace. This is actually a contradiction to the impersonal concept of Brahman.

Knowing Me to be the proper object of sacrifice and mortification, great Lord of all the worlds, friend of all contingent (means: depending) beings, he reaches peace. (Bhagavad Gita 5:29)

⁵ 18th book of the Mahabharata 1:4–5.

⁶ Brahman is the transcendent (surpassing physical existence) and immanent (existing within the world, opposite of transcendent) ultimate reality of Hinduism.

Nevertheless the thought of renouncing every attachment is not given up but expressed also in later chapters. The teaching of finding joy and satisfaction in one's self alone and being detached of everything that's connected with works includes even the rejection of gladness and the love for what is good as well as the rejection of evil.

Who has no love for any thing, who rejoices not at whatever good befalls (means: something unpleasant to happen to somebody) him nor hates the bad that comes his way—firm-established is the wisdom of such a man. (Bhagavad Gita 2:57)

Having a neutral attitude towards everyone is praised. However, it does not speak about active love or overcoming egoistic preferences in relationships with others which might be practiced by approaching everyone in the same way. The aim is rather indifference and passivity.

Outstanding is he whose soul views in the selfsame way friends, comrades, enemies, those indifferent, neutrals, men who are hateful and those who are his kin—the good and the evil too. (Bhagavad Gita 6:9)

Does this really fit our human nature which loves what is true and good and hates what is bad? Does it fit our nature which wants to become active for the sake of doing good in helping the one who is in need for instance?

Recommended acts of devotion: sacrifice and meditation

Gita's understanding of sacrifice underlines the importance of the attitude of love by exceeding the simple view of "What I give to God, I will get in return."

Be it a leaf or flower or fruit or water that a zealous soul may offer Me with love's devotion, that do I [willingly] accept, for it was love that made the offering. (Bhagavad Gita 9:26)

However, offerings to all different gods are accepted because it is anyway Krishna who ultimately receives every sacrifice.

Even those who lovingly devote themselves to other gods and sacrifice to them, full filled with faith, do really worship Me though the rite may differ from the norm. For it is I who of all sacrifices am recipient and Lord, but they do not know Me as I really am, and so they fall [back into the world of men]. (Bhagavad Gita 9:23–24)

Wouldn't a loving God want his worshippers to know whom they are serving and how they should serve instead of leaving them in ignorance? In other verses the personal relationship with Krishna is emphasised but here it seems that he does not desire this. He is satisfied with ritualistic worship given to other gods.

Eating sacrificed food purifies from all blemish.

Good men who eat the leavings of the sacrifice are freed from every taint (means: effect of something bad), but evil are they and evil do they eat who cook [only] for their own sakes. (Bhagavad Gita 3:13)

Another recommended means is to meditate on Krishna as described in chapter 6:

Let the athlete of the spirit ever integrate [him]self standing in a place apart, alone, his thoughts and self restrained (means: showing calm control rather than emotion), devoid of [earthly] hope, possessing nothing. Let him set up for [him]self a steady seat in a clean place, neither too high nor yet too low, bestrewn with cloth or hide or grass. There let him sit and make his mind a single point, let him restrain the operations of his thought and senses and

practise integration to purify the self. [Remaining] still, let him keep body, head, and neck in a straight line, unmoving; let him fix his eye on the tip of his nose, not looking round about him. [There] let him sit, [his] self all stilled, his fear all gone, firm in his vow of chastity, his mind controlled, his thoughts on Me, integrated, intent on Me. (Bhagavad Gita 6:10–14)

Keeping oneself perfectly still and concentrating on god one can reach the state of Brahman which in itself is total stillness, not influenced or moved by anything. Although one should concentrate on god while meditating the whole passage reflects strong concentration on oneself and emphasizes the right posture in a clean place.

Image about God—pantheistic⁷ and panentheistic⁸ view on the one hand and theistic⁹ view on the other hand merged together

Which image does the Bhagavad Gita have about God? First of all one can find statements reflecting a pantheistic respectively panentheistic understanding. Krishna says in 7:4–5:

Eightfold divided is my Nature—thus: earth, water, fire and air, space, mind and also soul—and the ego. This is the lower: but other than this I have a higher Nature; this too must you know. [And this is Nature] developed into life by which this world is kept in being. (Bhagavad Gita 7:4–5)

He identifies himself with the material world but also with a higher form of existence which “developed into life.” This expression means the totality of conscious matter that sustains the whole world because each individual, conscious self is a “part” of god as expressed in 15:7:

A part of Me in the living world, eternal, becomes a lively soul, attracting to itself the mind and senses, Nature making whole. (Bhagavad Gita 15:7)¹⁰

Further exemplary verses are in chapter 7:

I am Flavour in the water, in moon and sun I am the Light, sacred Word in all the Vedas, Sound in space and manhood’s Might. I am Fragrance in the earth, the Flames that in the fire appear, I am Life in every being, Asceticism (means: to renounce physical pleasures for religious reasons) in men austere (means: strict and serious). (Bhagavad Gita 7:8–9)(10)

As mentioned already above the Gita uses Buddhist terms and thoughts saying that yoga as a spiritual exercise has its goal in the “unlinking of the link with suffering-and-pain” (Bhagavad Gita 6:23). For a Buddhist it is the highest joy if the self becomes Nirvana. However, they do not speak about God as a distinct being or absolute entity¹¹ as the Gita does. The Gita then includes also a monistic¹² point of view in the teachings of Krishna. A monist who identifies the human individual soul with the ground of the whole universe can find his view presented in chapter 6 for example.

With self integrated by spiritual exercise he sees the self in all beings standing, all beings in the self: the same in everything he sees. Who sees Me everywhere, who sees the All in Me, for him I am not lost, nor is he lost to Me. (Bhagavad Gita 6:29–30)

7 Pantheism is the view that everything is of an all-encompassing immanent abstract, not personal God; or that God is synonymous with the material universe.

8 Panentheism believes that God exists and interpenetrates every part of nature. It claims that God is greater than the universe and that the universe is contained within God.

9 Theism is the belief in at least one personal deity.

10 Quoted from The Bhagavad Gita, a verse translation, Geoffrey Parrinder, Research Press 1999.

11 An entity is something that has a distinct, separate existence.

12 Monism in general means that there is unity in a particular field of inquiry. Here it holds that the human individual soul is the same as the divine ground of the whole universe.

The latter part of verse 30 seems to allude to an individual existence in eternity in contrast to the idea of the self being dissolved in the universal soul like a drop of water in the sea. The theistic conception becomes more and more visible in the later chapters. Krishna's sovereignty over Brahman can be seen also in chapter 14:

For I am the base supporting Brahman, —immortal [Brahman] which knows no change, — [supporting] too the eternal law of righteousness and absolute beatitude. (Bhagavad Gita 14:27)

Fools think of Me as one unmanifest who has reached manifestation: they know nothing of my higher state, the Changeless, All-Highest. Since [my] creative power and the way I use it conceal Me, I am not revealed to all; this world, deluded, knows Me not—[Me,] the Unborn and Changeless. Beings past and present and yet to come I know: but there is no one at all that knows Me. (Bhagavad Gita 7:24–26)

Although qualities like “unborn,” “changeless,” and “highest” can with difficulty be referred to God as an impersonal power, they best fit a theistic understanding. The mentioned feature of omniscience and the might to create in verse 25 underline this interpretation.

Krishna's revelations about the origin of the world again demonstrates how pantheistic and panentheistic ideas on the one hand and theistic ideas on the other hand are mingled together.

Great Brahman is to Me a womb, in it I plant the seed: from this derives the origin of all contingent beings. In whatever womb whatever form arises-and-grows-together, of those Great Brahman is the womb, I the father, giver of the seed. (Bhagavad Gita 14:3–4)

Gita's understanding of creation is not merely a pantheistic emanation¹³ of Krishna because he is the absolute Spirit, the Unmanifest beyond the perishable—“... in him all beings subsist, by Him this universe is spun” (Bhagavad Gita 8:22). Here in chapter 14 Krishna is greater than Brahman which fits the panentheistic view although terms like “father” and “giver of the seed” remind us rather of a theistic understanding. On the other hand it is still different from the monotheistic¹⁴ Judeo-Christian concept of creation out of nothing through God's word. If we compare the following two passages it becomes difficult to grasp the conception of God this book conveys.

It is I who pour out heat, hold back the rain and send it forth: deathlessness am I and death, what is and what is not. (Bhagavad Gita 9:19)

I will tell you that which should be known: once a man knows it, he attains to immortality. The highest Brahman it is called, —beginningless, —It is not Being nor is It Not-Being. (Bhagavad Gita 13:12)

The highest Brahman means here Krishna's nature as we have seen in 7:5 (Krishna is life which upholds the world) as well as in chapter 8:3 (“The Imperishable is the highest Brahman; it is called inherent nature in so far as it appertains (means: to belong to) to [an individual] self, —as the creative force known as works which gives rise to the natures of contingent (means: depending) beings.”) where it is the “Imperishable.” Because the Bhagavad Gita wants to include different philosophically contradictory world views, it ends up with statements that God is nothing and everything.

¹³ Emanation (“to flow from”) means that all things derive from God or first Principle by degrading to the multiplicity of all beings and objects whereas God is not clearly distinct from the world.

¹⁴ Monotheism states that there is only one personal God who is the creator of the whole universe and distinct from his creation.

Krishna loves man and should be loved and worshipped

The source of all am I; from Me all things proceed: this knowing, wise men commune with Me in love, full filled with warm affection. (Bhagavad Gita 10:8)

It is clear that only a personal being can be loved.

On Me your mind, on Me your loving-service, for Me your sacrifice, to Me be your prostrations: now that you have thus integrated self, your striving bent on Me, to Me you will come. (Bhagavad Gita 9:34)

It has been pointed out already in chapter 6 that the yogin who renounced every attachment and found liberation still lacks the adoration to God. The perfect spiritual man turns in love and worship to God—this goes beyond the Buddhist aim of becoming Brahman (which is Nirvana) and seeing oneself in everything and everything in oneself.

But of all athletes of the spirit the man of faith who loves-and-honours Me, his inmost self absorbed in Me—he is the most fully integrated: this do I believe. (Bhagavad Gita 6:47)

Krishna's love to man is expressed in the strongest way at the end of the Gita.

And now again give ear to this my highest Word, of all the most mysterious: "I love you well." Therefore will I tell you your salvation. Bear Me in mind, love Me and worship Me, sacrifice, prostrate yourself to Me: so will you come to Me, I promise you truly, for you are dear to Me. Give up all things of law, turn to Me, your only refuge, I will deliver you from all evils; have no care. (Bhagavad Gita 18:64–66)

It is visible that the pantheistic and panentheistic understanding on the one hand and the theistic understanding on the other hand are merged together. There is no clear distinction between the two. However, the thought of a personal God whom we should devote our lives to is given clear preference.

In a vision Krishna is seen as the transcendent¹⁵ body of the whole world

In chapter 11 Krishna reveals his divine majesty to Arjuna which can be regarded as the climax of the whole book. The bow warrior sees God with a celestial eye:

Arms, bellies, mouths and eyes all manifold—so do I see You wherever I may look—infinite your form! End, middle, or again beginning I cannot see in You, O Monarch Universal, [manifest] in every form! (Bhagavad Gita 11:16)

The whole universe is seen in this vision as the body of Krishna ...

Then did the son of Pandu see the whole universe in One converged, there in the body of the God of gods, yet divided out in multiplicity. (Bhagavad Gita 11:13)

... and everything enters his mouth ...

On every side You lick, lick up, —devouring, —worlds, universes, everything, —with burning mouths. Vishnu! your dreadful rays of light fill the whole universe with flames-of-glory, scorching [everywhere]. (Bhagavad Gita 11:30)

In contrast to the theistic teaching that differentiates between creator (as spirit) and his creation, Krishna appears as the transcendent body of all matter and all immaterial individual selves, as the one all unifying absolute self. He lives in everyone whether that person's life is good or bad.

¹⁵ Transcendent means surpassing physical existence.

Selfishness, force and pride, desire and anger, [these do] they rely on, envying and hating Me who dwell in their bodies as I dwell in all. (Bhagavad Gita 16:18)

Such a doctrine is unacceptable for someone who believes in an absolutely good God who does not partake in any evilness. The God of the Christians withdraws from everyone who misuses his free will for a selfish godless life.

Love towards others?—Conclusion

If we look for an answer to how a spiritual man should behave towards other people we find some general qualities like being “truthful, free from anger, renouncing, compassionate to beings, free from greed, gentle, modest, and patient” in the beginning of chapter 16. In the whole book of the Bhagavad Gita no mention is made of brotherly love and all that it includes, like helping our brothers in faith in their spiritual growth and endeavoring for people that they find the path to salvation. Instead one should meditate alone, being aware of the right or wrong body posture. Without thinking whether it is right or wrong he should fulfill his caste-duty. All these are expected to be done in a state liberated from any kind of fruits of works. This means to be free from every emotion and thought because these would lead to attachment and bondage. This is not surprising because the Gita, in spite of presenting Krishna as the only one and personal God, and in this way overcomes the pantheistic and Buddhist approach, does not draw clear lines. In fact the Gita wants to use former considerations of Hinduism by ascribing them a lower level of recognition of how to gain liberation. It stops midway. A verse in chapter 4 shows the limited view of a personal God:

In whatsoever way men approach Me, in that same way do I return their love. Wherever they may be, men follow in my footsteps. (Bhagavad Gita 4:11)

This reminds rather of a mechanical law that simply repays and not of a personal supreme being who loves the sinner and forgives the transgressions so as to help the weak and burdened out of their sins to live a life in joyful relationship with their creator.