

# Reading Guide to the *Bhagavad Gītā*

Merlin Philosophy Read-In Group  
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## Recommended Translation

The translation by Barbara Stoler Miller, *The Bhagavad Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*, is available at Montana Book Company. If you already have a different translation, that is fine too, but if not, this one is especially recommended.

## Background & Introduction

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is originally a tiny selection taken from the great epic poem of India, the *Mahābhārata*. The epic tells the tale of five brothers, the Pandavas (literally, sons of Pandu) as they win a great kingdom, have that kingdom stolen by a scheming cousin, endure a dozen years of exile, and then fight an epic battle against the aforementioned cousin and his allies ... along with very much more. The *Bhagavad Gītā* takes place immediately prior to that epic battle, as the two armies are arrayed across the battlefield.

The primary characters are Arjuna, the middle of the five brothers, and the great God Krishna, who has become incarnate as a human being, and has for many years been a friend of the Pandavas and also serves as Arjuna's charioteer. In its narrative form, this portion of the poem is spoken (or sung) to blind Dhritarashtra (the father of the scheming cousin) by Sanjaya, who has been given the gift of being able to see all of the past, present, and future. As the text opens, we see Dhritarashtra asking Sanjaya to tell him what is happening on the battlefield.

I will provide some additional background when we meet to discuss the text together.

The *Gītā* itself is divided into eighteen small chapters (or, as our translator calls them, eighteen "teachings"). Miller has also provided an introduction and some supplementary material; you can read that if you like, or simply dive right in with the First Teaching (on page 23 in my copy).

## The Plan for our Discussions

The text is short enough that I encourage you to **read quickly through the entire thing** before our first meeting, just to get a sense of the bigger picture, and then to **focus especially on the first five chapters/teachings**. For the first week, we will get a general introduction to the text and its context, and focus our discussion on those first five chapters (though references to later chapters are perfectly fine). In the second week, we will consider the remainder of the text, and extend the discussion outward to consider the reception of the text: the ways it has been understood and used by an incredible variety of people and groups over the last two millennia.

## Guidance for the First Five Chapters

In chapter 1, we find Arjuna looking out at the battlefield, dismayed at the prospect of the impending war. Here, he explains what his dilemma is, in terms of a **conflict between different duties**.

- What are these duties? More helpfully, perhaps: *Toward whom* (or toward what) does Arjuna have duties, and why?

What follows in the remainder of the text is, in a certain sense, the most famous pep talk in the history of the world, as Krishna encourages Arjuna to take up his weapons and enter confidently into the battle. But why should he do that? In chapters 2–5, we see most of Krishna's core arguments

presented for the first time. There are **roughly 3–5 different arguments** (depending on exactly where you divide them).

- What are Krishna’s arguments?
- How directly (or not) do these arguments respond to Arjuna’s worries?
- In what ways do Krishna’s arguments invite Arjuna to reframe the problem in different terms, to change his frame of reference or his standards of evaluation? How effective is this?
- Do Krishna’s different arguments support each other? Could they all work at the same time? Or is there some conflict or tension between them?

In the subsequent chapters of the text, Krishna will return to many of the same (or closely related) points, but we see most of the core ideas being expressed here at the outset.

### Guidance for Evaluating the Overall Text

Chapter 1 opened with a reference to “the field of sacred duty.” (While this comes at the end of verse 1 in Miller’s translation, in the original Sanskrit, the very first word is *dharmakṣetre*, meaning “on the field of duty.”) Chapter 13 again opens with a reference to the field, but now we are told that “the field denotes the body.” This is just one of many places where the text invites metaphorical or allegorical interpretations: the “war” is not just being fought on the plains of India thousands of years ago, but is also being fought right now, in our own personal and social lives. This invites us to ask:

- How (if at all) can the text’s arguments about duty apply to us, who are not in the position of literally going to war against our relatives and extended family?
- Where do our various duties come from? Why do we have them?
- Are there any limits to what these arguments will justify?
  - Consider, perhaps, that J. Robert Oppenheimer famously quoted verse 32 of chapter 11, when he witnessed the first atomic explosion. Was Oppenheimer simply doing his appropriate duty, in the same way as Arjuna?
  - Or again, consider the way in what Mahatma Gandhi, famous for his nonviolent resistance to British colonial rule in India, could consider the *Gītā* to be a central source of ethical guidance. How could that be, when Gandhi was explicitly renouncing warfare and physical violence?

### A Few Notes on the Translation

There are a few more-or-less familiar Sanskrit words, which have been adopted into English, but which Barbara Stoler Miller translates in unusual ways. These are noted in the back of the book, but I call attention to them here as well:

- “Action” translates (literally) the Sanskrit word *karma*.
- “Discipline” and “spiritual discipline” translate the Sanskrit word *yoga*.
- “Duty” translates the Sanskrit word *dharma*.
- The Sanskrit word *kāla*, which Miller translates as “time,” can also mean “death” (which is how Oppenheimer rendered it, in the quotation mentioned above).

For more information about these and other important philosophical and religious terms in the text, see the very last section of Miller’s translation, “Key Words in the *Bhagavad Gītā*,” at the back of the book.