

## INSIDE THE BHAGAVAD GITA

An Interview with Edwin F. Bryant, Ph.D.

*Dr. Edwin Bryant offers us a tour of the historical and religious landscape of the Bhagavad Gita in this interview, including a view of its influence on Thoreau, Emerson, Mahatma Gandhi and its relevance for Yoga students and teachers.*

**Integral Yoga Magazine:** Can you please create a context for us in which we can understand the *Gita* and its war-like setting?

**Edwin Bryant:** We first need to understand the *Gita* in its context as part of the world's largest epic, the one hundred-verse *Mahabharata*. The *Gita*, with its war-like language occurs about halfway through the epic. As the *Gita* begins, we learn what will result in a gory, gruesome war is about to erupt. We're not about to read the Sermon on the Mount or the Buddha's Deer Park sermon! All the known kings of the time are gathered—there are even references to Chinese troops, and to Greek and Hun forces.

Whether or not this is historically true, the epic presents itself with martial imagery and phraseology because it occurs in the midst of a world war. Arjuna isn't a disciple giving up everything to follow Buddha or Christ. He's a six-foot eight tall invincible warrior. Krishna himself is a *kshatriya* prince. The narrative is not about turning the other cheek. This can be quite a surprise to someone picking up the *Gita* for the first time and thinking it will be a pacifist type spiritual text and finding it reads like the script for Mel Gibson's *Braveheart!* [Laughs]

**IYM:** What is the *Gita's* relationship to other scriptural texts of Hinduism?

**EB:** As I said, it is part of the *Mahabharata*, so its context and some of its rhetoric is epic. But it is sometimes called the *Gita Upanishad*, because a good part of its content is *Upanishadic*; there are *Upanishadic* teachings throughout the *Gita*, and one can find there verses identical to some in the, for example, *Katha Upanishad*. That is why the *Gita* was appropriated by the scholastic *Vedanta* tradition.

*Vedanta* (along with the Yoga tradition) is one of the six orthodox schools of philosophy or *darsanas* that came out of the *Upanishadic* period. The *Vedanta* tradition set as its goal the clarifying of the *Upanishads*. That is what *Vedanta* is: scriptural interpretation or hermeneutics. Unlike Yoga, which is based on experiential insight, *Vedanta* is based on scriptural analysis. The *Vedanta Sutras*, written by Badarayana, is all about how to interpret the *Upanishads* in a consistent fashion. (Does he succeed? No, he creates another cryptic text that itself requires interpretation such that it gave rise to a number of different schools of *Vedanta* such as *advaita*, *visishtadvaita*, *bhedadbheda*,

*dvaitadvaita*, *shuddhadvaita* and *dvaita*). In any event, *Vedanta*, as a cluster of sub-traditions, focuses on three texts: the *Upanishads*, the *Vedanta Sutras* and the *Gita* (known as the *Prasthanas-Traya Granthas*) for the sole purpose of clarifying the *Upanishads*. So the *Gita* spans both the epic and philosophical genres.

**IYM:** When was the *Gita* first translated into English?

**EB:** The first translation of the *Gita* was issued in England in 1785 by Sir Charles Wilkins, but it was a long time before it was noticed. Eventually, as a growing western presence developed in India, traders and colonial administrators became interested in understanding Indians and Indian culture. Colonialists were looking for the one book, one prophet model with which they were familiar in Christianity and Islam, and in India they were faced with what seemed an exotic chaos and confusion of sects, traditions, gods and scriptures.

They wanted some single identifiable source they could cling to as to what Hindus believed so that they could interact with them and, eventually, better rule them. (That's not to say that some British weren't sincere humanists who believed, at least from their own frames of reference, that they could help Indians). So, some of the *Brahmins* said that the *Gita* was important and the British latched on to that. That is how it became referred to, for a period, by some British, as the "bible of India." Of course, there is no one "bible" in India, but a wide variety of texts that are authoritative to different communities.

**IYM:** What brought it to more prominence in the West?

**EB:** There was not much reaction to the *Gita* from westerners until much later, when it was discovered by Romanticists and Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau, and even then, the interest was not widespread but centered in intellectual circles of this kind. Their interest was still an abstract interest, and the *Gita* became detached from its Hindu context and read as a confirmation of the perennial philosophy or truth underlying all religions, as was espoused by such thinkers.

This was similar to its reading by the theosophists, who also later paid attention to the *Gita*. Another stream of western interest came from Christian scholars. Some, at least, felt that the *Gita* was asking the right questions, but that, while it had admirable theistic and other merits, it

did not have the right answers (which could only be found in Christ's revelations). As an aside, while Europeans in general could relate to the Krishna of the *Gita*, they couldn't relate to the Krishna of the *Puranas*, the Krishna of the *gopis* (his female devotees).

IYM: How did the Hindus feel about western appreciation or critique of the *Gita*?

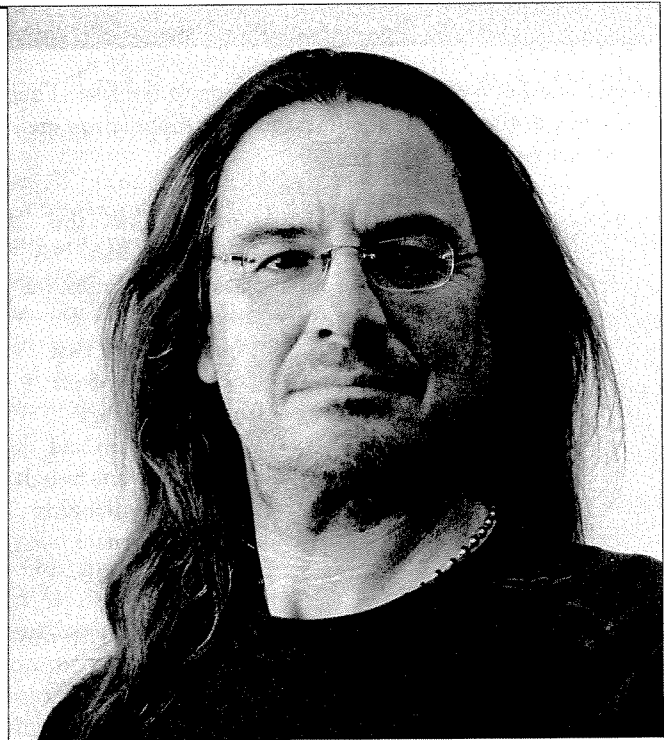
EB: Many Hindu nationalists and apologists were prepared to jettison much of their tradition (specifically, the Puranic content dealing with the stories of the great divinities of Siva, Vishnu and the Goddess), but they jumped onto the *Gita* as a kind of text around which they could rally much more easily than the *Kali Tantra* or the *Gopi Leela*. Hinduism had come under attack by westerners. Hindus wanted to show missionaries—who were criticizing their *Puranic* notions of divinity as having elephant's head, multiple arms or cavorting with other men's wives—that Hinduism also had a "rational" side—the *Upanishads* and the *Gita*.

Hinduism had been represented as uselessly mythological, other-worldly and as the reason why India was so chaotic. The British, however, could relate to the Karma Yoga of the *Gita*—the work ethic of doing one's duty. They could also relate to the *Upanishadic* portion—that there is a soul distinct from the body—and they could relate to the basic teachings of the *bhakti* portion, surrender to God. While Europeans couldn't accept Krishna as God, they recognized that the *Gita* contained some kinds of theistic truth, even as they felt Christianity was the higher truth. So there was some appreciation of the *Gita*. The result of this was Hindus prioritizing and popularizing the *Gita* more than might have been the case in pre-modern India, and the text's centrality outside of India as representative of Hinduism also becoming enhanced.

IYM: Is this why the *Gita* became popularized in America too?

EB: Gurus like Swami Satchidananda and Srila Prabhupada, who arrived in the West in the 1960s, came from that apologetic, nationalistic milieu. They presented the *Gita* as a scripture of which they could be proud, and it became central to them. When they came to the America, they brought various teachings—including, of course, Yoga, which was to become the most visibly successful—and the *Gita* was part of this package of exported Hinduism. Currently, the *Gita* is the most commonly translated text from India, with the biggest circulation in the West of any Hindu scripture. I recall reading that there are now over well over 300 non-Indian language translations.

IYM: Why do some say the battlefield of the *Gita* is symbolic, not historical?



Dr. Edwin Bryant

EB: This notion of it being symbolic comes from the Theosophists who were looking for the universal, perennial truths underlying all religions, and thus typically depicted the surface or historical context of religions as symbolic. History has passed Theosophy by, somewhat, but they were very important players in pre-independence India. This type of reading was then picked up by Mahatma Gandhi as a nice, post-enlightenment way of looking at the *Gita*.

The idea that the five Pandavas represent the five senses, for example, was picked up by Gandhiji from Theosophy. He read the *Gita* every day, but for him, the *Gita* practically ended at Chapter Two. Fifty percent of his commentary is on Chapter Two. He wasn't interested in the *bhakti* elements and, because of his nonviolence ethic, what was he going to do with the violent setting of the *Gita*? He appropriated the theosophic notion of the symbolism of the war. While one can appreciate how this may have worked well for Gandhiji's non-violence agenda, one should be clear that such symbolic readings are modern readings; they are not the pre-modern traditional or classical understanding of the text.

IYM: In your view, what is the *Gita's* central theme?

EB: Krishna is consciously drawing on the main things going on in the religious landscape of the time and subsuming these under *bhakti*. The *Mahabharata* occurs at a time when *Vedic dharma* is under attack by both non-*Vedic* traditions and by ascetic traditions within the *Vedic* fold. While *Vedic* ritualism remains the mainstream religious activity of the time, this is also a period in which

## SPECIAL SECTION: EXPLORING THE BHAGAVAD GITA

ascetic, meditative traditions were coming to the fore. The questions in the *Gita* of action rather than non-action are posed in this climate.

Krishna re-affirms the value of *varnashram dharma* (the various orders of life including student, householder, *sannyasi*) with each of its associated actions and duties, in other words, of action in the world rather than renunciation of it. He is presenting a spiritual path that combines *atma jnana* (wisdom of the Self) with a work ethic. While Krishna puts forth a strong Karma Yoga message, the ultimate message (as revealed in 18.66 and throughout) is *bhakti*—surrender to Krishna. Even though some may find the notion of God as Krishna challenging to their own religious sensitivities, the *Gita's* ultimate message is surrender to a personal God.

**IYM:** Do you think some may be uncomfortable with this overtly *bhakti* message?

**EB:** Well, we all bring our own theological baggage to reading a text like the *Gita*. If you are not interested in Bhakti Yoga, the *Gita* also presents an *atma*-based world view embedded within a paradigm of working in the world without attachment and without incurring karma—Karma Yoga. So if you choose to avoid the *bhakti* part, Jnana Yoga and Karma Yoga are strong sub-messages of the *Gita*. But *bhakti* is the ultimate message.

It's clear that the *Gita* focuses much more on Ishwara (God) than did the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. Patanjali promotes Ishwara in a more optional way. The *Gita* is a more in-your-face theism. Krishna is unambiguously asserting his supremacy. Patanjali's Ishwara remains unidentified, and therefore you can plug in the God of your choice. But Krishna asserts he is Ishwara, and this is more challenging to western religious sensitivities. So there's a lot of material in the *Gita*. It has Jnana Yoga (the *atma* discourses), Karma Yoga (dutiful selfless action),

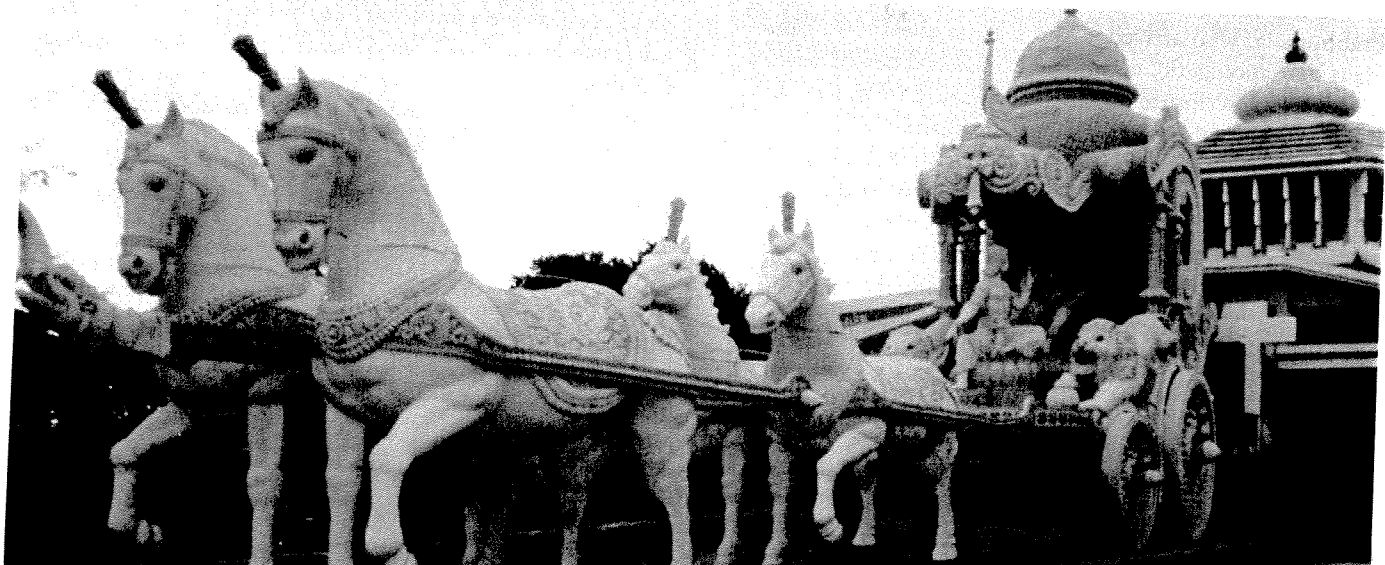
sections on Raja Yoga (classical Patanjalian Yoga) and much else, but the fact is that the text consciously subsumes all this under *bhakti*, which might be more challenging to some. It's a more forceful theism than Patanjali, though both are theistic texts.

**IYM:** Could you contrast the message of the *Gita* in relation to the *Yoga Sutras*?

**EB:** As I said, there is a *jnana* message in the *Gita*—that there is an *atma*, a Self—and a section in Chapter Six dealing with Patanjalian meditative Yoga; but this latter sub-theme in the *Gita*. Patanjali dedicates his entire text to providing a process to realize this *atma* (*Purusha*) in his *Yoga Sutras*. Patanjali is ascetic in his approach and fairly extreme: *Yogas chitta vritti nirodhah*. Right in his opening verses Patanjali informs us that his project will be to teach us how to realize the *Purusha* soul by stopping thinking all-together! That's about as radical as you can get! The *Gita* offers a more world-friendly, social-system friendly, career and relationship friendly option. It's a less intimidating option that talks about realizing the *Purusha* (soul) in the context of action without personal desire and, ultimately higher than that, action as an offering to God, which is *bhakti*. The *Gita* allows us to remain in the world and to function in the world. We can maintain our social duties, maintain our relationships but subsume or engage those in Yoga.

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*Sri Gurudev in front of the temple cart, Palani Hill, India, 1984.*

**Inside front cover photo:**  
*Sri Gurudev offers worship in South India, mid-1980s (Photo Art by Sraddha Van Dyke).*

**Inside back cover photo:**  
*Sri Gurudev gives a spiritual discourse, Satchidananda Ashram-Yogaville East, Connecticut, 1976.*

**Back cover photo:**  
*Sri Gurudev offers prayers at Sri Sri Radha Vrindaban Chandra Temple, during a visit to New Vrindaban, West Virginia, early 1990s.*