

The Play of Violence

Swami B.V. Tripurari

When we portray violence in a drama none of the actors are actually hurt. It is only play. Perhaps if we could stand back from the drama of everyday life and view it as if it were just that, a drama to which we are only a witness, we could better understand the violence in our lives, and



from the vantage point of the soul we could see that no one really gets hurt. This is precisely what the *Bhagavad-gita* advocates, and from the position of witnessing the human drama rather than being caught up in it, Sri Krsna invites us to exit the theater of the human drama and accept a role in another drama--the play of God (*lila*).

The play of God is the larger circle within which the drama of humanity appears as a smaller circle. However, the larger circle of God's play occasionally appears within the smaller circle of humanity to convey mystic insight into the nature of both of these dramas. The *Bhagavad-gita* is a prime example of this.

Krsna's counsel in the *Bhagavad-gita* represents the most concentrated segment of time he spends on directly instructing humanity throughout his entire play on earth. From it we learn all that we need to know about the drama of human life. We learn the mystery of how inaction can be action, how nonviolence within humanity can be violence. We also learn all we need to know about God's play to prepare ourselves for a role within it, including the mystery of how action can be inaction, how violence within God's play can be nonviolence.¹ The mystery surrounding God's descent within humanity is discussed at the beginning of the *Gita's* fourth chapter. In his introductory remarks Krsna explains things about himself that make his Godhood apparent to Arjuna. Arjuna understands that his dear friend is God himself mystically appearing within the world as if he were a player in the human drama. The *Gita* thus explains the principle of the *avatara*. Understanding this principle is foundational to understanding the nature of the *yogic* war--the Battle of Kuruksetra--that Krsna implores Arjuna to participate in.



Krsna begins chapter 4 by explaining the history of the science of yoga and his own participation in its dissemination, which involves his instructing the sun god Vivasvan thousands of years before. His statement creates a doubt in Arjuna's mind and thus Arjuna questions his friend and mentor.

“Arjuna said: ‘You took birth long after Vivasvan was born. How then am I to understand that you instructed him previously?’”² By asking about Krsna's apparent recent human birth in contrast with the ancient celestial birth of the sun god at the dawn of creation, Arjuna paves the way for Krsna to enlighten him about his omniscience, his eternality, and the mystic nature of his appearance in this world.

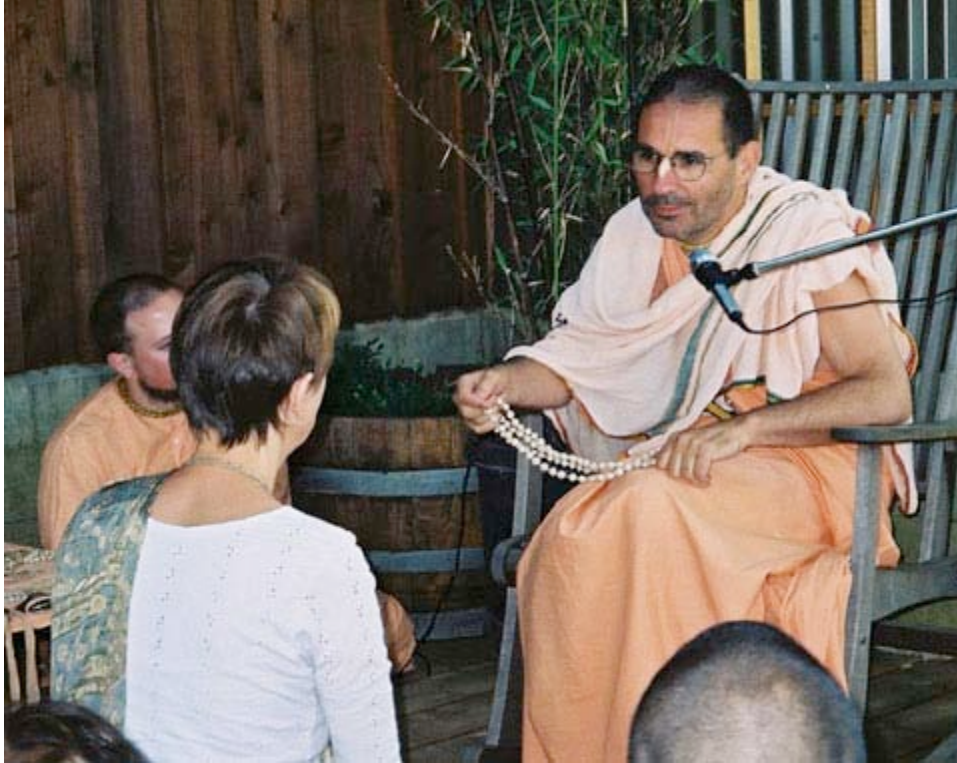
“The Lord of Sri said: ‘Arjuna, both of us have passed through many births. I know all of them, whereas you, subduer of enemies, do not. Although I am the controller of all beings, nevertheless, remaining in control of my material energy, I manifest by my own inner power.’”³

Here verse 6 is particularly significant. Krsna says that his descent is under the jurisdiction of his primary potency (*atma mayaya*)⁴ and that when he descends he remains in control of his secondary potency, material nature (*prakrtim svam*).⁵ This is significant because it tells us that God, while descending, remains aloof from the governing influence of the human drama--material nature. Furthermore, we learn that God has a special mystic potency that causes his descent.

This special potency is God's primary potency that governs all of his personal activities and those of his perfected devotees.⁶ It is his own personal power constituting his essence or intrinsic nature (*svarupa*). God's play comes under the jurisdiction of his primary potency, even when it appears within the smaller circle of our human drama, and it is never influenced by his secondary potency over which he has full control. It is independent of the laws of material nature even when functioning within nature. From it--God's play--we can expect miracles on earth. As we shall see, the Battle of Kuruksetra involves such miracles. Arjuna's participation in it also requires nothing short of a miracle, for he must become God-like himself.

The *Bhagavad-gita* teaches us what this entails. The starting point is detachment from the fruits of one's work, because God's play is not based on the erroneous reading of material manifestations that arises from attachment to them. The extent to which one is attached to an object is as much as one's eye of objectivity is obscured. Thus detachment reveals the nature of the world and the necessity to witness it rather than wallow in it. Furthermore, genuine detachment arising from mystic insight makes one aloof from the influence of material nature and it is thereby the basis of nonviolent life within God's play.⁷





Before discussing God's play further, let us first examine the nature of material attachment within the human drama and how it fosters violence even when it speaks of nonviolence. We shall also look at the task before Arjuna in the *Gita* and see how his initial advocacy of nonviolence actually constitutes violence. We will discuss how the entire *Bhagavad-gita* advocates transcending material attachments and the violence they involve for the sake of entering into God's play and a life of absolute nonviolence. In returning to God's play, we will examine the Battle of Kuruksetra in particular, which is an excellent example of nonviolence within violence under the jurisdiction of God's mystic potency.

While God's play involves detachment, the human drama is based on attachment. According to the *Gita*, attachment to the fruit of one's work is the basis of exploitation and thus violence.⁸ In this condition, the soul thinks itself to be the doer of acts that are in reality performed by material nature.⁹ Thus it lives in a virtual reality under the stern hand of the karmic law that governs both the psychic and the physical plane. It is the soul's material desire or attachment that causes material nature to react and imprison the soul in its karmic web.



Attached to and thus identified with matter, units of consciousness imagine necessities that in fact are only relative to matter. While the soul is eternal, it struggles with the threat of death when identified with matter, for the material manifestation it has identified with is not enduring. Under karmic law the soul moves out of a necessity born of material identification.

Because the body has needs, those who identify with it feel needy themselves. We live in the human drama at the cost of others. Here everyone is on the take. One living being is food for another. Short of realizing this predicament and making a comprehensive solution to it, our giving is tinged with getting, our nonviolence with violence. In this plane we must kill in order to live, however politely.

In the human drama, people are their attachments. Desire makes the world of *samsara* go 'round. The task that the *Gita* lays before us is to slay our attachments and extinguish the material desire that generates the human drama. It asks us to die an ego death to live without struggle, to be free from violence and all forms of exploitation. Our identification with matter, our material ego, must die if our soul is to have a life of its own. This is what Krsna asks of Arjuna: to slay his material ego. While Arjuna, due to his material attachments and subsequent identity based on those attachments, hears Krsna asking him to fight against his own relatives, in reality Krsna asks him to slay his attachments and thus free his soul.

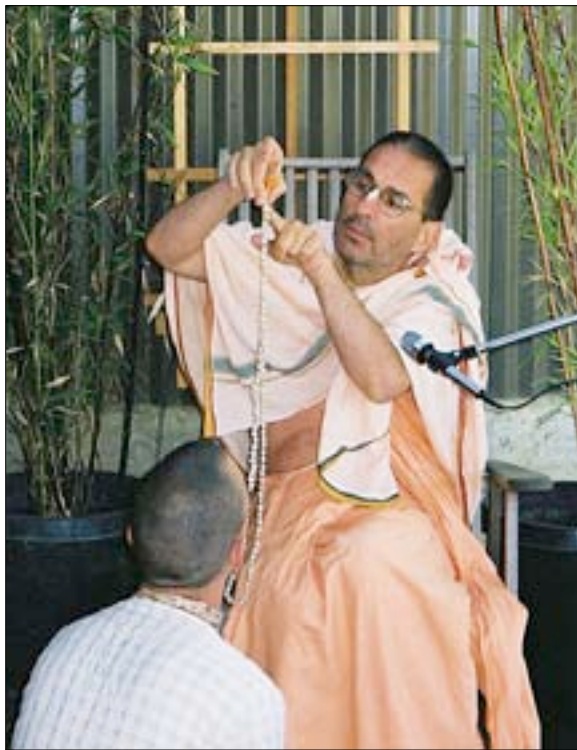
Arjuna speaks eloquently in the first chapter of the *Gita*, advocating inaction and nonviolence in the face of a great fratricidal war. But before doing so, he asks Krsna to drive his chariot between the two armies so that he can see who has assembled to fight. Krsna does so, commenting that both armies are one--Arjuna's relatives, the Kurus.¹⁰ Krsna stops Arjuna's chariot in front of Bhishma and Drona for good reason. These two personify Arjuna's greatest attachments. They represent his entire martial career and his closest family ties, Drona being his military guru and Bhishma his grandfather who took the place of his deceased father in raising him. By stopping Arjuna's chariot in front of these two warriors whom Arjuna will have to fight against, Krsna, in his first act of the *Gita's* drama, speaks loudly to us about the nature of material attachment and its power to distort reality. All of Arjuna's arguments for nonviolence, however well-reasoned and however valid under different circumstances, amount to a grand rationalization arising from material attachment. He is unwilling to dismantle his identity within the human drama when the time to do so arrives of its own accord on God's schedule.

Arjuna speaks of compassion and despair at the thought of the violence such a war will entail. The thought of fighting with his relatives makes him feel as though he is losing his mind. He does not see how any good can come from the battle. He feels that



while others may be overwhelmed by greed for a kingdom and thus prepared to fight, he is not. He argues on the basis of the importance of preserving family tradition, religious principles, and so on.¹¹ He concludes that pacifism is the best course: “It would be better to be killed unarmed and unresisting.”¹² Again, all good points, were they not raised in this particular context.

The context is that Arjuna is seated before God in the midst of his play intended to deliver Arjuna from the illusory human drama. Appropriately, God’s play places Arjuna before all of his material attachments that make up his role in the human drama. Arjuna is the military disciple of Drona and the grandson of Bhishma. Materially speaking, we are our attachments, and slaying them is what is involved in dismantling our illusory, fleeting, material persona, which is a prerequisite for landing our role in the eternal play of God.



Arjuna’s reluctance to fight and advocacy of inaction or nonviolence are not only grand rationalizations for maintaining material attachment, from the vantage point of God’s play they are an expression of violence. His overt inaction and nonviolence are subtle forms of passive aggression. They are violence to the soul because they implicate him further in karmic bondage. Everything belongs to God, and when we imagine things as belonging to ourselves, we not only deny the proprietorship of God, we turn others into objects of our sense indulgence and emotional needs, viewing them through the lens of our imagined mental/sensual identity. We reinforce the illusory roles we and other souls play in the human drama at the cost of self-realization and a role in God’s play.

From a purely spiritual perspective, the human drama is ultimately self-destructive. While consciousness animates matter, the subsequent movements of matter



obscure the fact that consciousness is its animator. Consciousness is thus lost to itself. When a person acts such that he completely obscures his potential, forgetting who he is, we call this act of violence self-destruction. Thus from the vantage point of God's play, the extent to which one is not involved in transcending God's secondary potency one renders the entire human drama an act of self-destruction.

This is not to say that nonviolence within the human drama is worse than overt violence. The *Gita* considers nonviolence a godly quality,¹³ one that should develop in a person who is cultivating spiritual life. Arjuna, however, is a *ksatriya*, a warrior. In the socio-religious scheme of the *Gita*, qualified violence has a place in the political arena. It is considered religious for a warrior to fight for a religious cause. But the *Gita*, while arising out of this socio-religious framework, is ultimately not about a socio-religious orientation to life. From the purely spiritual vantage point of the *Gita*'s conclusion, even religious life aimed at material remuneration in this life and heavenly attainment in the next is a form of exploitation and violence to the soul.

The vast majority of people do not read the *Gita* for directions on socio-religious life, but rather for inspiration in spiritual life. In the *Bhagavad-gita*, such socio-religious life is only mentioned in passing, with at best a view to emphasize the fact that spiritual life has at its foundation dutiful, responsible living. In the entire *Bhagavad-gita*, there are only eight out of seven hundred verses in which Krsna directly encourages Arjuna to fight because it is the religious duty of a warrior to do so.¹⁴ These verses appear only because Arjuna argued that it would be irreligious to fight the war, and even in replying to Arjuna's mistaken notion, Krsna concludes this section of verses with an advocacy of yoga.¹⁵ When understood in context, any other verses in the *Gita* that appear to advocate the righteousness of a religious type of war are clearly addressing a particular stage of yogic spiritual pursuit that Krsna wants Arjuna to engage in.¹⁶

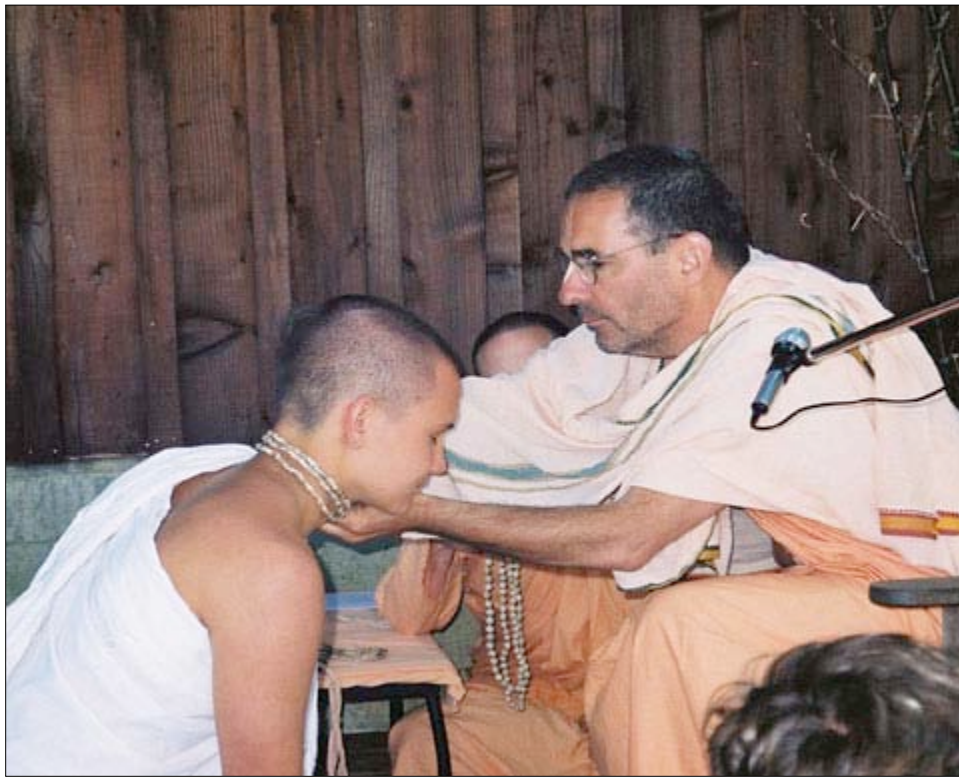
Socio-religious life involves coloring the human drama with a Godly brush, whereas spiritual life involves transcending the human drama altogether and entering God's play. Modern readers of the ever-contemporary *Bhagavad-gita* want to learn about the spirituality of yoga, and they find that the battle of life is won when the material ego is slain. It may be a warrior's duty to fight for a righteous cause, but all such causes pale in consideration of the plight of the soul itself. From chapter 1 through chapter 18, it is this plight that the *Bhagavad-gita* is concerned with, that and the soul's highest prospect.

Indeed, although Krsna appears at a glance to seek Arjuna's allegiance on religious terms, in his concluding remarks he tells him to completely abandon religious concerns¹⁷ and stand firm on the stage of God's play, poised to enter this drama of devotion. Self-surrender in devotion and, more, self-forgetfulness in love constitute the



stage on which the drama of God’s play is performed, a drama and *dharma* that leaves no room for exploitation or violence--not even its religious expressions.

After 18 chapters of discussion, Arjuna finally understands what Krsna’s sermon is about. Thus Arjuna surrenders to Krsna’s will after understanding the reality of his soul as a mere witness to the human drama and of its highest prospect in God’s play. He fights without attachment, surrendered, out of love for God in a plane where action is inaction in that it is not karmically binding, where apparent violence is nonviolence.



Fully developed in yoga, having slain his material ego and thus free from the web of karmic law, and now under the influence of Krsna’s primary potency, Arjuna fights the battle of Kuruksetra. As we learn in the beginning of the *Gita*, the battlefield of Kuruksetra is *dharmaksetra*.¹⁸ It is a righteous place made sacred by nothing less than Krsna’s meeting Goddess Radha here fifty years earlier. It was here, deep within the play of God, that Krsna admitted that he was conquered by Radha’s love.¹⁹ Here Krsna becomes the chariot driver of Arjuna.²⁰ Within the play of God and devotee at sacred



Kuruksetra, where the devotee becomes the deity of God, what appears to be violence is nonviolence.

What is true nonviolence? When a person understands himself to be only a witness to the human drama, he ceases to act in relation to it and is thus not bound by karmic implications. Furthermore, his enlightened, detached action has a liberating effect on others. Removed from the drama itself, and ceasing to generate a role in it for himself, having extinguished material desire, the soul is at last peaceful and truly nonviolent. He has taken himself out of the hectic life-threatening virtual karmic reality and attained lasting peace. No time, it would seem, for war. Yet it is war, the Battle of Kuruksetra, that in spite of Arjuna's yogic evolution and understanding Krsna asks him to fight in. What kind of war is this then? It is not a war of ordinary religious *dharma*, although all that is religious is included within its scope. It is a war of *prema-dharma*, the *dharma* of love that constitutes the play of God.

God's play is not action that is born out of any necessity. It may be good to conclude that once satisfied one has no reason to move. Desire--need--causes one to move and generate a false identity in the human drama. Free from the bondage of desire, why should one move? Peace holds more for us than all the movement of the world. While the *Gita* reasons like this in no uncertain terms, the Song of God offers still better reasoning as well. Krsna tells Arjuna that if one is truly satisfied and full in oneself, another type of movement is mandated, that of celebration in divine service. Such is the movement within the play of God. A celebration of his fullness, God's play overflows into human society.

By nature's law--the influence of God's secondary potency--all will die only to be born again,²¹ but when God's play comes within the human drama, any death that occurs is under the jurisdiction of God's primary potency. Death in God's play is liberating. Those under the influence of God's secondary potency who come in contact with his play are liberated. They attain freedom from the virtual karmic reality without having to undergo the arduous battle of yoga.²² They rest in the eternal peace of *mukti*, whereas those like Arjuna who consciously participate in God's play attain the full fruit of yoga in eternal celebration. What then was the bloodshed of the Battle of Kuruksetra?

The contrast found in the *Gita* between the thought of killing millions of people--including one's own relatives--and the pure state of consciousness Krsna wants Arjuna to attain must be noted and underscored. This contrast is there to teach us just how pure the devotee of Krsna is and just how high God's play is. Throughout the *Gita*, Krsna teaches Arjuna what it means to be free from false ego, unidentified with the movements of one's body, renounced, selfless, and so on. This is no small accomplishment, and this state of



consciousness cannot be imitated. As much as Arjuna is woeful at the prospect of war, he is awestruck by what Krsna is teaching him to be.

Arjuna's participation in the holy war of Kuruksetra requires his being holy in the highest sense--free from all bias, and most of all religious bias. The possibility of abusing this teaching of the *Gita* leading to antinomianism and an unrighteous so-called religious war is checked considerably by the standard of consciousness described at length and mandated in the text. The person who is "not culpable even when slaying many people" and "who does not actually slay" is "free from all egotism and pure in intellect."²³ He has attained a God-like status and has no need to struggle, no need to fight.

Careful study reveals that it is practically unimaginable that one could attain this state, but the good news of the *Gita* is that it is indeed possible to be such a person--a devotee--and that this is the perfection of life. It involves a state of consciousness in which, for the sake of emphasis, even violence is nonviolence. As unimaginable as this exalted state is, so to is the Battle of Kuruksetra.

It is said that 640 million warriors died²⁴ in the 18-day battle on a tract of land 80 miles in circumference.²⁵ And what were the weapons of the war? Bows and arrows empowered by mantras that produced extremely sophisticated nuclear-like weapons of mass destruction.²⁶

This constitutes the largest human carnage in the history of the world, in which eight times more people died than the number of civilians and soldiers lost in all of the wars of the modern world combined.²⁷ Furthermore, the weaponry of the war is said to have been superior to anything known to humanity at this time, yet we have no war memorials to remind us of the tragedy, no burial grounds, no weapons to replicate, nothing whatsoever to remember or document the war by but the immortal *Bhagavad-gita* itself. Did it really occur?

Yes and no. The battle is not a historical event that can be documented with modern methodology, nor is it something that could have taken place within the realm of human possibility. Yet if the war is merely a myth, then either there is no play of God within the human drama or the *Bhagavad-gita* and the Battle of Kuruksetra are not part of God's play. According to the *Gita*, neither of these two are an option. Thus we are left with the conclusion that the battle did and did not occur. Its violence is nonviolence.

The history of this war is the inconceivable history of the larger circle of God's play coming with the smaller circle of the human drama. How can it be documented? Through the practice of *bhakti-yoga*, the yoga of love. In the consciousness of pure love for God, mature devotees hear Krsna's conch heralding victory for the *dharma* of love as he enacts the drama of the *Bhagavad-gita* and commands Arjuna to take part in the yogic



battle of Kuruksetra--an event infinitely more real to realized devotees than the illusory, mythic drama of humanity's misidentification with matter. It opens for them the door to a realm of possibility that cannot be found within the confines of matter. In the homeland of the soul nothing is impossible. It is here that Krsna's play, with all of its theological and philosophical ramifications, is eternally performed.

The play of Krsna is as human as it is divine. In the drama of Krsna's play, many things occur under the influence of his magical primary potency that do not quite fit into material calculation. Just as in drama things happen that do not happen in the "real world," things happen in Krsna's play that do not tally with our sense of possibilities. The play of Krsna is carefree, which at the same time is wonderfully filled with knowledge, lessons by which humanity can realize its own potential for love.

Krsna plays, and through this play he teaches and attracts us. Arjuna is encouraged by the most loving God to be instrumental in the killing of 640 million people, and if that is not bad enough, some of them were his own relatives. Why didn't Krsna stop the war and convert Duryodhana by other means? Certainly he had the power to do so. The reason is that this was his play, his personal drama in which no one is really killed, and through it he teaches everything we need to know to be absolutely nonviolent.

Notes

¹ See Bg. 4.18 for a verse that speaks directly about action in inaction and inaction in action. Also see Bg. 5.7. Otherwise, this is a recurring theme throughout the *Gita*. Arjuna's reluctance to act is a form of passive aggression that is karmically implicating. Krsna's idea of fighting does not implicate one in karmic bondage. It is ultimately about being in the world but not of it, as is Krsna's position.

² Bg. 4.4

³ Bg. 4.5-6

⁴ Here I am explaining the *Gita* through the lens of Gaudiya Vedanta. Jiva Goswami calls it *acintya bhedabhed tattva*. God is possessed of inconceivable potency, or *sakti*, that is simultaneously one with and different from him. His inconceivable (*acintya*) *sakti*, by which he does the impossible, is referred to in Bg. 9.5 (*yogam aisvaryam*). God's primary potency is referred to as his *svarupa sakti* or *antaranga sakti* (internal/primary/spiritual potency).

⁵ This potency is referred to as God's *maya sakti* or *bahir-anga sakti* (external/secondary/material).

⁶ Bg. 4.6 speaks of God's primary potency governing his personal activities. See Bg. 9.13 (*daivim prakrtim*) for an example of this potency governing the activities of God's devotees.

⁷ Bg. 2.70-71

⁸ *Kama*, or desire, is called very injurious/sinful (*maha papma*) in Bg. 3.37.



⁹ Bg. 3.27

¹⁰ Bg. 1.24-25

¹¹ Bg. 1.27-44

¹² Bg. 1.45

¹³ Bg. 16.2

¹⁴ Bg. 2.31-38

¹⁵ Bg. 2.38 concludes this section and in it Krsna uses the words same *krtva* (equanimity in action) that define the yogic state. Indeed, the same word (*samah*) is used in Bg. 2.48 to define yoga, and this verse is in fact an explanation of Bg. 2.38 and the entire section of verses under discussion.

¹⁶ We find such verses in chapter 3, which is about *karma yoga*. Those verses found in chapter 18 (18.46-48) are part of an overall summary of the entire text that takes us from dutiful socio-religious life to self-forgetfulness in love of God.

¹⁷ Bg. 18.66

¹⁸ Bg. 1.1

¹⁹ See *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 10.82.44.

²⁰ The essence of the *Gita* is found in the idea that at the zenith of spiritual attainment the devotee conquers God through love, and thus love itself is supreme. This is evidenced in the *Gita* by the fact that the supreme Godhead Krsna becomes the chariot driver of his devotee Arjuna. In the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* he is defeated by Radha's love.

²¹ Bg. 2.27

²² According to Jiva Goswami's *Krsna-sandarbha*, this is relative only to Krsna's play and not to that of any of his *avatars*.

²³ Bg. 18.17

²⁴ See Sanga, *Kuruksetra War: 'myth, history or lila'*

²⁵ Kuruksetra of today, with all of its important holy places relevant to the battle, is considered to be an area 80 miles in circumference, although the *Satapatha Brahmana* 11.5.1.4 seems to indicate that it may have been larger in ancient times.

²⁶ Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada identifies the *brahmastra* as a nuclear weapon in his *Srimad-Bhagavatam* translation and commentary on 1.7.19.

²⁷ This calculation includes the Civil War, Boer War, Mozambiquean War, Russian Revolution, Korean War, Vietnam War, World War I, and World War II. See Hutchinson Encyclopedia (1996) and Macmillan Encyclopedia (1981).

