

Bhagavad Gita Keywords & Concepts

Invocation:

Mookam karoti vaachaalam pangum langhayate giram

Yatkripaa tamaham vande paramaananda maadhavam

I salute Madhava (Krishna), the source of supreme bliss, whose grace makes a dumb person eloquent and lets a cripple cross mountains!

Some Key Words and Concepts

Karma—from the root “kr”, meaning “action”

1. Any activity, including yogic activities and rituals
2. The accumulated effects of your actions, showing up as the circumstances of your life.
3. The cosmic force of evolutionary causality, wherein all actions, words and thoughts have consequences.

Dharma—from the root “dri”, meaning to be established or “to hold”

Dharma in its deepest sense is the foundation of life. As such, it is a multi-leveled concept, central to the ethics and aims of the Bhagavad-Gita.

Among its meanings:

- Duty or obligation, as applied to our profession, family situation, or stage in life.
- Righteous conduct, ethical actions, the basic guidance that a human being lives by and based on which he/she makes decisions. So, one way to answer the question of “What is my dharma?” is “What is the right thing for me to do?”
- Higher law or religion (as in Buddhadharma, meaning Buddhist religion) or Sanatana Dharma (the eternal religion of Hinduism)
- Eternal truth, that is, the actions that allow you to know your Self: “This is the supreme Dharma: the vision of the Self through yoga
- The unique purpose of an individual’s life, embedded in his nature, which he or she must discover and express in order to be fulfilled.

Guidelines for Discerning Your Dharma

(From the *Yajnavalkya Samhita*)

“The sources of dharma are known to be these: the sacred texts, the practices of the good, whatever is agreeable to one’s own self, and the desire which has arisen out of wholesome resolve.”

Then the passage goes on to give us a kind of dharmic bottom line: **“Over and above such acts [as] ... self-control, non-violence, charity and study of truth, this is the highest dharma: the realization of the Self by means of yoga.”**

Upanishad: (literally, “sitting near”)

A series of authoritative yogic texts based on conversations between sages and their pupils (who sat near them to hear; hence the name Upanishad). The subject of the Upanishads is yoga, specifically, the aspects of yoga that tend to align you with the inmost Self, the pure consciousness that is your core and the source of your life.

The Bhagavad-Gita is considered an Upanishad.

In the Indian tradition, the Upanishads are considered the primary authority on the inner yogic truths. They are the source of the core teaching of Vedanta, which states that the true Self (*atman*) is not material or even mental. The Self is the seer, the witness; the pure consciousness that inhabits matter but also transcends it. In modern practice, consciousness is that which makes all experience possible. When we enter directly into that in us that knows our experience, we enter the Self. The Self is NOT the ego, or false self, but the awareness that is the ever-present background of experience.

Characters in the Bhagavad-Gita

Krishna: (“dark one”). Also, known as **Madhava** (sweetness), **Govinda** (master of senses)

Krishna is an avatar (a human incarnation) of Vishnu, the sustaining power of the universe. A master of yoga, a warrior, a lover, a king, he states that his purpose on earth is to restore dharma to comfort the good. He is the object of much of the devotional practices in India. In the West, he is best known as the form of God celebrated by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON), popularly known as the “Hare Krishna’s.” The devotional traditions of bhakti, which include kirtan and other devotional practices, are often directed at Krishna.

The Heroes

Pandavas (Heirs of King Pandu): Five heroic brothers who are fighting for the return of their kingdom, which has been usurped by their evil cousin Duryodhana. Each of the Pandavas has been fathered by a god.

Yudhishthira: Son of the god Dharma, or Yama. The eldest brother, he can discern between right and wrong action, and always acts for the good.

Arjuna: (“Clarity” or “Lightness”) Fiery warrior and master of yogic self-control. Krishna’s best friend and devotee.

Bhima: Greathearted warrior of immense strength and vitality.

Nakula and Sahadeva: Twins, who hold the powers of resisting anything that takes them away from truth.

The Villains

The Kauravas and Their Allies

Dhritirashtra, the blind regent, who is blind to the higher truth and so weakly, allows his son Duryodhana to usurp the kingdom from the Pandavas.

Duryodhana, representing unbridled desire and anger (**kama** and **krodha**), is the leader of the opposing forces in the battle.

He is supported by his 99 brothers as well as by many great warriors, including:

Bhisma: The elder statesman of the family, related to all the cousins, but fighting with the Kauravas. He represents the ego (*asmita*) that clings to tradition.

Drona: The mentor and martial arts teacher of the cousins, representing the power of habit.