

## Invitation to World Literature: The Bhagavad Gita Video Transcript

Glass:

The thing that's most striking about the Gita is the degree of focus that it brings to a very simple question. Action and inaction, what is the best thing to do?

Kaul:

People ask me, what's the Gita really mean? I'm always like it's really simple. A guy's facing the biggest challenge of his life, like all of us do, and is faltering.

Desai:

How do I fight my cousins, my relatives, my teachers? I can't do this.

Dasa:

This course of action cannot be avoided. Now it's time for justice.

Pollack:

(reads from the Gita in Sanskrit)

Desai:

I remember as a child actually hearing recitation of Gita on the radio, aware of the fact that this was something very important, but not knowing what it meant, because these were recitations in Sanskrit.

Glass:

I probably began reading The Bhagavad Gita more than fifty years ago, in my twenties. I was struck by the beauty of the language, the power of the imagery and what the work was about.

Kaul:

Parents put a comic book in front of me based on the Gita, this one right here actually. This comic book just laid it out to me so clearly. Like kinda being shown the core before seeing the rest of the planet.

Crawford:

I read the Gita in Divinity School. The more you read it and the more you think about it really the better it gets.

Hawley:

We live life in the everyday and yet we're aware all around us, inside somehow, that that's not just the way every day is. We dream, we go off into other selves. We come back. We get scared. We wonder what it's all about. The Gita has all of that. That's what got me.

Crawford:

The Gita is the most philosophical and probably the most sacred book in modern Hinduism. It lays out everything a Hindu needs to know to live a good life on Earth. It lays out the nature of the universe, the nature of the soul, what is truth. And, I think most importantly, the attitude that we should take when facing any difficulties on Earth.

Damrosch:

The Bhagavad Gita was one of the few books that Henry David Thoreau took with him to Walden Pond. It inspired the philosophy of civil disobedience of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela. It also inspired Gandhi's assassin to kill him. The Gita has been treated as a Hindu Bible, as a philosophical treatise. As a self-help book.

Glass:

We talk about the Gita; it can be a philosophical text. It can be a religious text. It can be a call to action. Which is it? Well it's all of them really. It's all of them. And the power of the Gita is that it functions that way

GRAPHIC: HEART OF AN EPIC

Desai:

Bhagavad Gita is a section of this grand epic that is bigger than Iliad and Odyssey, combined by eight times or something. So this is a huge, huge text. And Bhagavad Gita is one small section.

Damrosch:

The Mahabharata is one of the two great ancient epics of India written over a period of several centuries between about 400 BCE and 400 CE.

Crawford:

The Mahabharata doesn't have a single writer; instead it links together groups of stories that have existed on the Indian subcontinent for a long time. It has everything you would ever want. It has love, it has magic, it has deep spiritual meaning.

Pollock:

The Bhagavad Gita, "the song of the Bhagavan", of the blessed one, begins at the tipping point of the whole epic. So it's an extremely dramatic moment where the least likely person in the epic is going to express his horror at what effectively is the pending civil war.

GRAPHIC: WHAT LED TO THIS MADNESS?

Crawford:

It has become the story of five brothers, the sons of the Pandavas. Arjuna is actually the middle brother. These brothers are in the midst of a struggle for their kingdom with their cousins.

Kaul:

The cousins, the Duryodhana, who are jealous.

Crawford:

There's a famous place where... the older brother loses a dice game.

Desai:

The oldest of Pandavas is addicted to gambling.

Dasa:

It's a dice game, and everybody knows the game is rigged. The Pandavas end up losing the whole kingdom. And they get exiled for 13 years...with the understanding that when they return, the kingdom will be given back to them.

Kaul:

The Pandava brothers go off into the forest for thirteen years in their exile. And when they come back to town, their cousin Duryodhana said, Screw you, I'm not giving you anything. At one point he put them in a palace and he tried to burn them alive.

Dasa:

Krishna, who according to the Gita is a supreme divine being, the creator, God, says "Listen Duryodhan, this was part of the plan. You really should hand over the kingdom to the Pandavas. And Duryodhan, he said "I won't give them enough land to drive a needle through." At that point it was clear that war was inevitable.

Pollock:

When you read the futility of these repeated embassies and you finally reach the Gita you understand something about the terror of the moment that is now upon us.

Damrosch:

It's kind of fitting that Robert Oppenheimer quoted from The Bhagavad Gita when he saw the first nuclear explosion because really this story is the story of a nuclear meltdown. This is going to be the end of civilization as we know it and the characters know it themselves.

Pollack:

Civil war is the end of all rationality and civil life, and that's where we are.

Crawford:

Lined up are cousin fighting cousin, brother fighting brother on the sacred battlefield of Kurukshetra.

Dasa:

The bugles, the drums, they've all sounded. That means there's no more need for words. It's time for battle.

Pollack:

They've marshaled for war. And the greatest of all the warriors, Arjuna, for the first time in the epic expresses hesitation.

#### GRAPHIC: ARJUNA THE WARRIOR

Damrosch:

The great champion of the good guys, or the Pandava brothers, Arjuna, comes on the field with his charioteer Krishna. And at the moment they enter the field the battle is about to start, but Arjuna stops. He wants to think, he wants to pause, he doesn't know if he can possibly go through with slaughtering his cousins on the other side.

Crawford:

Arjuna is the all-around warrior. When it comes to military strategy and bravery and decisiveness Arjuna always takes the lead. He's rumored to be the best Bowman in the world.

Dasa:

Arjuna just surpassed everyone. His dedication was phenomenal. He would even go to such lengths as practicing in the night, in the dark.

Damrosch:

There's a great moment there earlier in the epic where Arjuna wanders into a forest kingdom and the local king wants to test his ability. And he has a bird tied up to a branch on the far side of a clearing, on a tree. And he says, "Arjuna, okay, I've got this bird there, can you see this branch that he's on?" Arjuna says, "No, your majesty I don't see the branch." And the king says, "Well how good an archer are you? Can you see the tree I mean?" And Arjuna says, "No I'm sorry, your majesty. I don't see any tree over there." And the king says "You're supposed to be the greatest in the world! Arjuna, what do you see?" Arjuna says, "I see only the bird."

#### GRAPHIC: CRISIS

Desai:

There is Arjuna. And he faces this army on the other side and Krishna is his chariot keeper.

Crawford:

According to the Hindus Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu. Vishnu is the embodiment of god force.

Hawley:

And Krishna steps on stage as this deity who is also human at the same time.

Crawford:

As far as Arjuna knows Krishna is just someone who showed up one day and said, I remember you from a past life—but you won't remember me. Arjuna takes that at face

value. All Arjuna knows is that Krishna is a man who is blue and soon they become fast friends.

Dasa:

This concept is I think very fascinating because we see the supreme divine being, the supreme creator, coming down to this earth and in a very humble mood taking the role of serving his dear devotee Arjuna.

Pollock:

He's his charioteer. He's his pal. There's something about their intimacy that allows for secrets to be communicated.

Dasa:

Arjuna makes a strange request. "Krishna, can you please take my chariot into the middle of the battlefield, because I like to see who I have to contend with." And so Krishna does that. And Arjuna goes into a real dilemma here upon seeing his family members.

Hawley:

It's at that moment that Arjuna throws down the weapons and says, I can't fight, this is stupid. Look what's going to happen. It's utter genocide, both from their side and from ours. What is the point?

Damrosch:

(Reading): "Arjuna sat dejected, filled with pity, his sad eyes blurred by tears. And he asked for help from his charioteer, Krishna. Krishna, how can I fight against Bhisma and Dhrona with arrows when they deserve my worship? It's better in this world to beg for scraps of food than to eat meals smeared with the blood of elders I killed at the height of their power while their goals were still desires."

Cuomo:

The first big singing that Arjuna does in my piece is at the moment of crisis when he says "I know this must be wrong to do this".

Cuomo:

In setting that I thought a lot about what the psychology of Arjuna was in that moment and what he was going through emotionally and how he was in fact almost paralyzed so that I made the music very still and almost motionless and Arjuna's singing in a way that he's terrified by what he sees but in a way that he's also almost kind of stunned by it.

Dasa:

He decides to kind of just sit there and wait for something. And he says Krishna you instruct me, you tell me what is best for me. I'm totally confused.

Kaul:

The Gita is basically the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna. You know, Krishna opening Arjuna and convincing him to fight this battle. That's what it is. It's like the deeper self, convincing the ego and the emotions and all the fears to overcome and to face life.

Crawford:

Because Arjuna is the ultimate warrior that's what makes his crisis so important. If Arjuna can have a crisis about doing his duty and can wonder is it all worth it, then maybe the rest of us can, too.

Glass:

So it goes to the very question of existence. You can call it a philosophy if you want, or you can call it poetry. If there is such a thing as the Lord or a sovereign of some kind of universal, who knows. I have no idea. But the act of imagination of the people who wrote the Gita was to believe that if there was such a person, these were the words he would say.

#### GRAPHIC: KRISHNA'S TEACHINGS

Crawford:

Conveniently Krishna has the ability to freeze time, which is how he can deliver this book in the midst of a battlefield while everyone else patiently waits on the side.

Kaul:

Essentially what Krishna does is walk Arjuna through the nature of life and how to live it.

Hawley:

Arjuna has the challenge of trying to figure out how he should ready himself for whatever is coming. How he should become disciplined. There's the discipline of knowledge, jnana, there's the discipline of action, karma, and there's the discipline of love, bhakti.

#### GRAPHIC: ACTION (karma yoga)

Kaul:

The idea of karma yoga. I mean, I was brought up on that principal. The way I crystallize that is do your best, forget about the rest. Empty yourself and just focus on the action itself

Cuomo:

(Reading): "Be intent on action, not on the fruits of action. Avoid attraction to the fruits and attachment to inaction."

Hawley:

Krishna says, "Action, you can't escape it. Even if you sit down and do nothing for 1000 years. That very doing of nothing is it's own form of action." What you can do, is to

detach yourself from your desires and what you think you can get by acting. That's what you have to learn to be beyond.

#### GRAPHIC: KNOWLEDGE (jnana yoga)

Pollock:

There is a path of knowledge, the jnana yoga. The teaching here concerns the nature of the self and its relationship to external reality.

Dasa:

(Reading): "As the embodied soul continuously passes in this body from boyhood to youth to old age, the soul similarly passes into another body at death. A sober person is not bewildered by such a change."

Dasa:

Krishna is trying to help Arjuna understand—the soul is ageless, it's deathless. So be relieved of this fear and anxiety that you're going to kill somebody.

Desai:

One of the fundamental characteristics, I believe, of religions that emerge out of India is this belief that somehow this life on earth is only one piece of a much larger cycle, in which your soul has traversed.

Kaul:

Once you accept that death is just a part of life, you start to understand the nature of the universe, the nature of life itself. And then you can actually live.

Crawford:

Arjuna is looking for what is right. And the word he uses to talk about what is right is the word dharma. Dharma is the biggest idea in Hinduism. It means duty. It also means truth. It also is a synonym for god. So he's asking in a deeper way, how do I play my role in the universe the way I need to play that role?

Hawley:

So, that's what the Gita is. Krishna trying to bring Arjuna into the action so that this major story of world history can go forward.

#### GRAPHIC: LOVE (bhakti yoga)

Crawford:

Krishna gives a third way to think about being a good Hindu. And, that's bhakti or devotion. He urges Arjuna, When you do action you should do it as a form of worship, you do it as sacrifice to me, you dedicate your actions to me. So these three ways, through action, through knowledge, and through devotion are still three very popular ways that Hindus access spiritual truth and none of these ways is better than any other way.

Kaul:

I'll never forget this you know. My father never talked to me about what it meant to be Hindu or not and it was really up to me. And then one day we watched Star Wars for the first time, I was a young boy, and outside in the parking lot he got all teary eyed ...and he just told me, you know, if you want to know what it means to be Hindu, just think of Obi Wan Kenobi and the Force.

Kaul:

When you realize that you are basically light and matter, there's nothing that you can't do. That's what the Jedi Knights are; they live in a state of action, knowledge, and devotion.

Dasa:

Here's a book, a condensed version of Hindu philosophy condensed into 700 short verses which the average person, you and me, can open up, read and understand and apply into our lives with ease.

Coumo:

The Gita is certainly not a proselytizing text. What most westerners are attracted to and see in it is that there are tools for how they might live their lives in a daily way.

Crawford:

What comes through for all my students is that the Gita gives them a perspective that what matters maybe isn't what is exactly in front of them at the moment. The Gita can be an antidote to the intense focus on results, to help bring us back to feeling satisfaction about doing one's best even when the results may not be all that one wish they would be.

#### GRAPHIC: KRISHNA REVEALED

Hawley:

You read that teaching about the self. You read about discipline and then all of a sudden Arjuna gets tired of it or maybe Krishna thinks that he's understood enough and he says, Alright if I'm going to take all of this seriously, I want to see you. I want to see you the way you really are. And then you get this explosion of imagery on the page, where Krishna reveals himself in forms that we can't begin to understand.

Damrosch:

(Reading) "Howling storms, sun gods, bright gods and gods of ritual, gods of the universe, twin gods of dawn, wind gods, vapor-drinking ghosts, throngs of celestial musicians, demigods, demons and saints, the worlds tremble and so do I."

Hawley:

Finally Arjuna says stop, I can't stand it. Stop; go back to what's familiar to me. Return to that form that I know how to relate to you in. Go back to there.



Desai::

This cosmic vision, is actually partly to describe the divinity of this very human being.

Hawley:

In the Gita itself, he is the self behind all gods. He is deity. He shows himself to be everything. Shiva, Vishnu and all the rest. So, he's more than just a figure in the pantheon. From the point of view of this text. He is the pantheon represented in one person.

#### GRAPHIC: THE GITA GOES GLOBAL

Desai:

One of the things that I think is so special about the Gita, is Sanskrit. Sanskrit is a very ancient language. It is understood but it's not so much a spoken language. It's a language of reading, literature, recitation, and rituals.

Pollack:

The Gita has been a core text of Indian philosophers probably since the middle of the first millennium AD. But, when Charles Wilkins arrives in India in the last quarter of the 18th century I don't think anybody really knew about The Bhagavad Gita in the Western world. That Wilkins translation set Europe on fire. The German intelligentsia of the early 19th century was obsessed with the Gita.

Crawford:

The first translation of The Bhagavad Gita really arrived in the states at the same time the transcendentalist movement was taking off. Thoreau had Gita at Walden.

Hawley:

(reading): "In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of The Bhagavad Gita, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial."

Hawley:

Henry David Thoreau was willing to withdraw from the world for the sake of engaging with it. Well, that's what the Gita is about. It's all about engagement with the world and then Krishna stops the action at a certain point because the action won't go on unless he does, and says, Let's withdraw for a moment. Let's look at what's behind this. And then proceed. That I think is what Thoreau was doing when he took the Gita to Walden Pond.

#### GRAPHIC: GHANDI

Glass:

I was approached by an opera company. It was the Netherlands Opera in Amsterdam. And they asked me if I wanted to write an opera. I said, Well, what about an opera about Gandhi? I discovered that the Gita was the book that he based most of his life on. He had actually memorized the text. I was stunned by this because here was a man who was active in social change and the thing that guided him, his mentor in a sense, had been a book.

Hawley:

Gandhi was the leader of the Indian National Congress and the person who was largely responsible through his own personal charisma of orchestrating that fight in India which meant that the British did finally quit India.

Glass:

How can a person dedicated to non-violence enter into battle? And that is the question. And that's the question of the Gita ...and the answer for Gandhi becomes a movement of social change through non-violence. That becomes the answer.

Pollock:

What does a person whose entire political philosophy is based on non-violence...what does he do with the ethical teaching of the Gita? I mean what does Krishna actually say? Do your duty. Be unattached, but do your duty and get out there in the battlefield and kill these people.

Hawley:

How did he manage to get non-violence out of the Gita? He says about the Gita that, to him, it seems as if the text is really, about self-hood and that the battle he sees being waged in the Gita therefore, is a battle that all of us face inside. And it's a battle between good and evil.

Pollock:

Krishna is not telling Arjuna to go and kill some person in real life but this is a, this is an account of an interior battle and that doing your duty within this warring self is what's critical.

Desai:

For Gandhi, actually reading this text was also about moral clarity. And it is about defining the notion of one's moral duty. It is that idea that he takes on, rather than it's just about the war. So it's how do you find the moral compass for yourself.

Glass:

And in the end he became the victim of violence himself. He was assassinated in 1947 and assassinated by people who claimed that they were also following the tenets of The Bhagavad Gita. At the very end of the opera, it's the night before the first big march. Krishna is kind of summing things up for Arjuna and he said... "When virtue has withered, has died down, I come into the world and become a man among men and live to put virtue on its seat again."

## GRAPHIC: I WILL FIGHT

Dasa:

Krishna says, "Well you know how this world works; you know the law of karma. I've explained everything to you. But now ultimately, you have to walk through the door. You have to make the choice."

Cuomo:

Krishna says to Arjuna (reading): "Arjuna, have you listened with your full powers of reason? Has the delusion of ignorance now been destroyed? And Arjuna replies, Krishna, my delusion is destroyed and by your grace I have regained memory. I stand here my doubt dispelled, ready to act on your words."

Crawford:

Arjuna stands up and says, I'll do it. I'll fight.

Dasa:

That's how the Gita ends and the Mahabharata continues.

Kaul:

The Gita to me is really a simple idea; anytime you feel a lack of faith in yourself or how things are going on just remember: Son, universes are consuming universes. It's gonna keep going, there's nothing you can do to stop it. Get on with it, move, go, live, enjoy it and fight through life. Breathe through life, breath it.

Glass:

Things that people thought about three thousand years ago are still interesting to us and still relevant to us. These ideas were debated and thought about and raised questions and now here we are and we're still finding it interesting.

Hawley:

The secret purpose of this battle is kind of to reveal who Arjuna actually is. Arjuna as the self standing for all ourselves. Insofar as we're reflective people, that's what all of our situations actually are. We're the ones out there fighting.

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