



The Bhagavad Gita

The Song of God

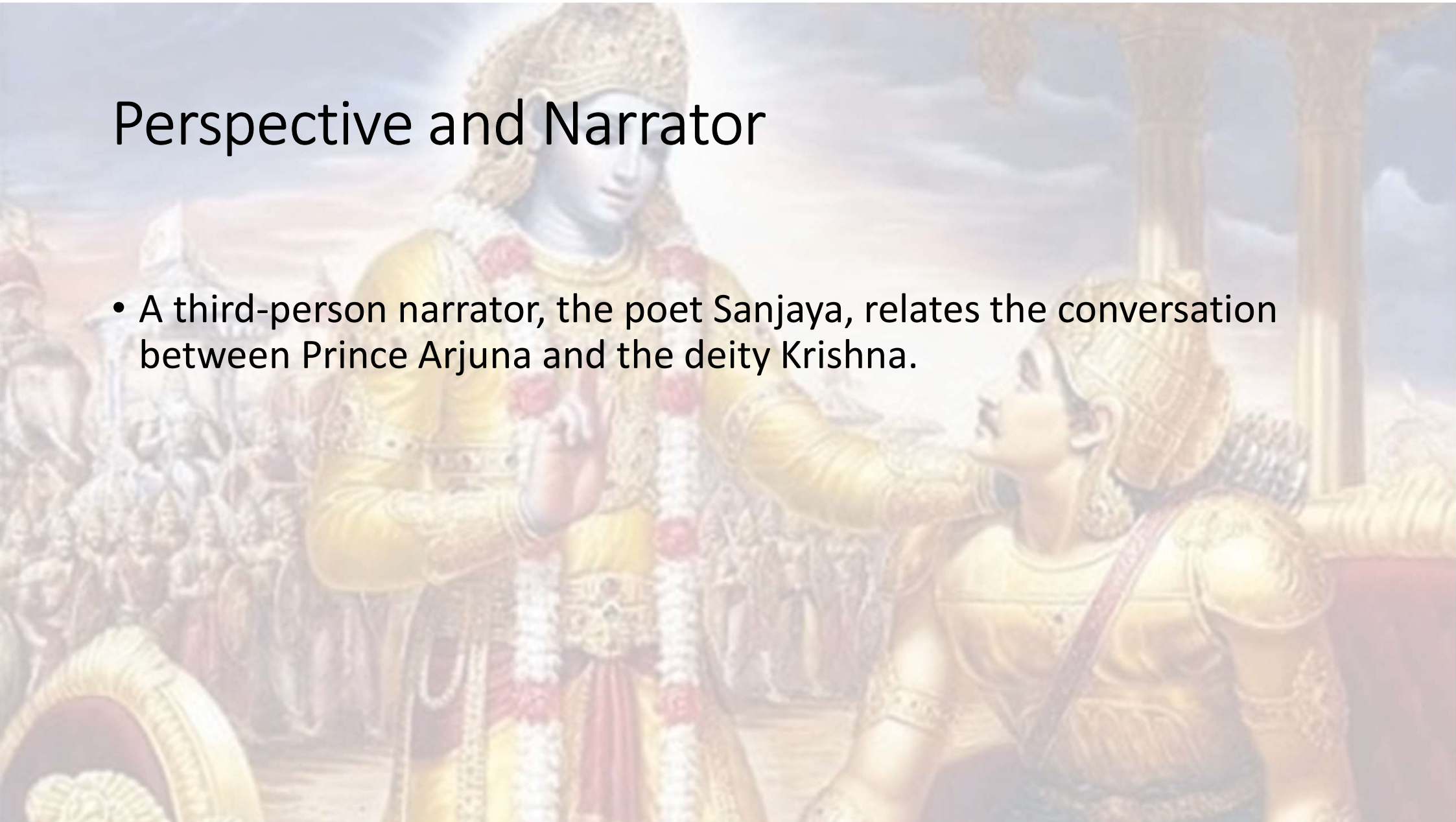
Background




- The *Bhagavad Gita* is part of the larger Indian epic called the *Mahabharata*, one of the most beloved epic tales of all time in India and particularly important to many Hindu sects.
- The *Bhagavad Gita* has moved from the status of epic or legend to religious text in many communities.
- The conversation that unfolds between Krishna and Arjuna is widely viewed as a metaphorical commentary on spirituality, as Krishna explains to Arjuna the necessity of acting on the battlefield while detaching himself from the consequences of the fighting.

Perspective and Narrator

- A third-person narrator, the poet Sanjaya, relates the conversation between Prince Arjuna and the deity Krishna.



Hindu Texts – Shruti + Smriti



There are two major groupings in the Hindu tradition

1. **Shruti - 'that which is heard'**

- Includes the Vedas
- Includes the Upanishads (fourth section of the Vedas which includes commentary and philosophical inquiry)
- Texts that have been handed down by the great sages and comprise the basis of most Hindu philosophy

2. **Smriti – 'that which is remembered'**

- Texts passed down in the memory of ordinary people
- Considered less sacred but smriti texts are more influential in modern practices of Hinduism
- Epics such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana are considered smriti

The Mahabharata



- The Gita is one small part of the epic known as Mahabharata
- The longest poem still in existence with 100,000 verses (The Gita has 700)
- It tells the story of the Pandavas and Kauravas, two related families who clash over the ruling of a kingdom
- The Gita takes place just before the battle starts, with Prince Arjuna hesitant to fight his relatives

Main Characters in the Bhagavad Gita



Arjuna

Arjuna is a young prince of the Hindu warrior, or Kshatriya, caste. The third of the Pandava brothers, he is the son of Kunti and the god Indra. Arjuna and his brothers are cousins of the Kauravas. The Pandava and the Kaurava cousins battle each other in the Mahabharata. Arjuna is well known and respected for his wisdom and his fighting ability, particularly his archery. Though the Bhagavad Gita opens with Arjuna in crisis, he obtains peace with his duty to fight by conversing with Krishna. Arjuna represents an archetypal hero. The story begins with Arjuna in a state of doubt, but he gains courage and calmly resolves to do his duty.

Krishna

A very popular Hindu deity, Krishna is a symbol of devotional love. A complex figure, he appears in many religious texts and stories outside the Bhagavad Gita, often depicted with blue skin and playing a flute. He is sometimes portrayed as having four arms, as Arjuna notes in the Gita. Arjuna's charioteer and adviser in the poem, Krishna reveals himself to Arjuna as the supreme being and shows the young warrior one of his more terrifying forms. Krishna loves Arjuna deeply and tells him not to fear. He also promises Arjuna that if he cultivates divine love for Krishna, Arjuna will come to him when he dies. The lessons Krishna conveys to Arjuna are for all beings.

The 3 Paths of Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita



The Bhagavad Gita extols three major *margas* or paths of Yoga which help the aspirant frame his personal nature with the highest goal, realization and union with Brahman, or the all-knowing and pervasive consciousness that governs the universe.

Although each path is different, the destination is ultimately the same. One path is not higher than the other; rather the lessons of each contain its own unique wisdom that provides an integrated and balanced view of one's relationship to oneself and the higher reality.

These three paths are:

1. **Karma Yoga:** the path of Selfless Action
1. **Bhakti Yoga:** the path of Devotion
2. **Jnana Yoga:** the path of Self Transcending Knowledge

Karma Yoga – The Path of Action

- The Vedanta (ancient spiritual philosophy) says, that there is an impurity in our minds called Mala (not the mala beads).
- Mala = motivation to act in the interest of self-gain, anything that drives us to ‘be somebody’ (respect, wealth, success etc.)
- In this selfish attitude we forget that we are so much more than our physical body and emotions.
- Karma Yoga is the path of action, the intention woven within our actions.
- Karma yoga suggests that we let go of the ‘how will this benefit me’ mindset, therefore letting go of expectations and act with an attitude of selfless service.

According to the Bhagavad Gita, those who act in this way transcend the cycle of karma and the momentum of cause and effect which perpetuate the life situation of our perceived identity. This frees us from the bondage of suffering because there is no expectation of how things “should or shouldn’t be.” There is only “things as they are.” When there is no expectation, there is peace. Or as the Xinxin Ming Daoist text states, “The Great Way is effortless for those who have no preference.”

Bhakti Yoga – The Yoga of Devotion

- According to this path, a lack of faith in the Divine or Sacred Essence has caused us to lose connection to our Divine Self.
- The solution, therefore, is love, surrender, and devotion to the Divine qualities in everything.
- Bhakti Yoga asks us to purify and transform our egotistic self-love by focusing the mind on sacred thoughts and transferring all our love and emotions into the Divine essence that permeates all.
- Examples of Bhakti Yoga are chanting (Kirtan), puja, and devotional rituals. This path resonates most with those of an emotional nature.

Jnana Yoga – The Yoga of Knowledge

- This path asserts that our ego-based ignorance (Avavana) keeps us from knowing our true nature.
- Using the techniques of logic and reason, the yogi uses the mind to inquire into its own nature. This removes the veils of ignorance and forgetfulness through knowledge and reveals the Truth that is unchanging in our hearts.
- Jnana Yoga is a process of learning to discriminate between what is real and what is not, what is eternal and what is not.
- Through a steady advancement in realization of the distinction between Real and the Unreal, the Eternal and the Temporal, one develops into a Jnani.
- This is essentially a path of knowledge and discrimination in regards to the difference between the immortal soul (atman) and the body.

The 4 Paths of Yoga



It is vital to mention here, that the Gita only looks at

1. Karma Yoga
2. Bhakti Yoga
3. Jnana Yoga

Yoga, however, has four paths, which also include *Raja Yoga* (to unite the practitioner with its highest self → see 8 limbs).