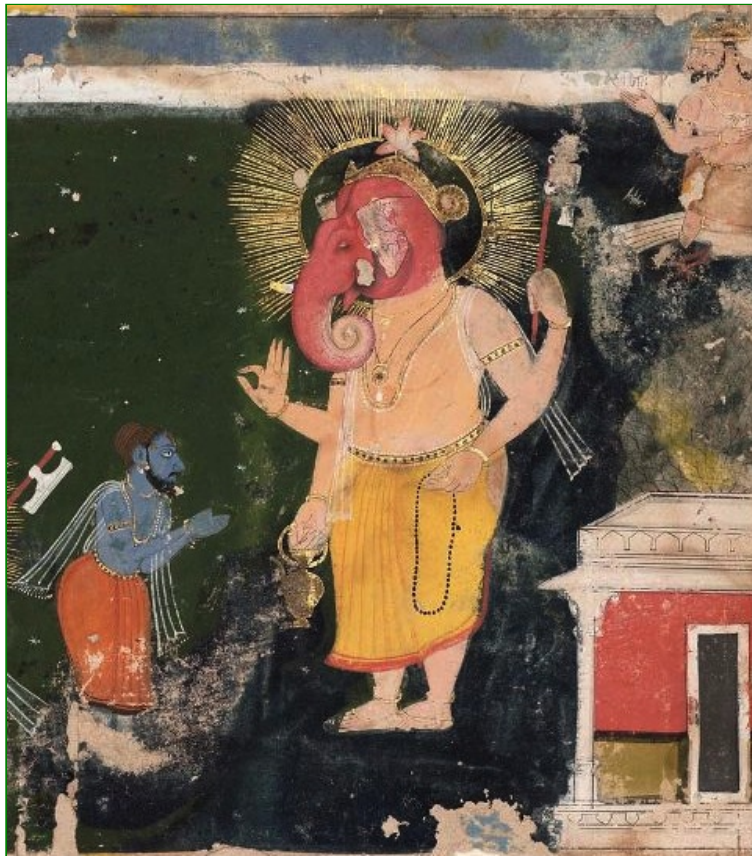


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Ontological musings



Ganesha writing the *Mahabharat*, one of the two epics of Ancient India. (Image Source: Detail from a 17th century illustrated

The Delirium of Appearance

By Abhilash Nath

The philosophy that the Ancients developed around their understanding of Brahma, or the real self, or in a modern sense, the pure form of time, actually parallels the Tao of Chinese philosophy. A central concern is that the apparent self, the psychological self, should be negated to realise the true self, Brahma. The Ancient epics portrayed Krishna as someone who achieved precisely this.

Time unhinged carries with it fear and fury. In an increasingly interconnected world, a crisis of conscience, stimulated by the attachment to material things, haunts our beings. Its reverberations are heard from the beginning of the modern age. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche screams: ‘The wasteland grows: woe to him who hides wastelands within’. More than ever, it is in our present time that the crisis of conscience demands attention and hence the nectar from ancient wisdom that can only nourish life. In this essay, I aim to make sense, both for myself and for the reader, of the insights that one such tradition developed in the Indian sub-continent.

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In the following, I am going to focus on a crisis that unfolds in Vyasa's epic poem, the *Mahabharata*, one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India (the other being the *Ramayana*) and the solution that is offered there. If the *Ramayana* expounds the perfect King, then the *Mahabharata* illuminates the process of making him. It focuses on the purging from the heart of anger and emphasises understanding and empathy. By narrating the moral degeneration and violence of its time, it teaches us to show compassion to all, and encourages us to understand the fundamental nature of the psychological Self and physical reality. The insights that can be found in revisiting the epic can become only more valuable in times when we are at increased risk of losing touch with ourselves.

In an eternally replayed drama, birth in human form is a chance for a life to attain self-realisation, and freedom from reoccurrence. For this reason, both Brahmin sociology and Buddhist mysticism give it immense value. The tale of King Yudhisthira is the most virtuous of the five Pandavas, the five acknowledged sons of Pandu, and so, he is the only one at last sets foot in heaven. At the end of the *Mahabharata*, Vyasa uses this occasion as a way for the King to remind us of the central purpose of the poem. At heaven, the King, however, becomes angry, when he finds there his enemies, the hundred cousins, and not his wife and brothers. Worse, after he enquires about the fate of his relatives he finds out that they all are in hell! So, he blames the Gods for betrayal. At which, the Gods ask the king, why are you angry, if you have already renounced everything? If you couldn't forgive, even after renouncing your kingdom, brothers and the wife; are you truly worth? Why couldn't you renounce anger?

This questioning gains force from a deep intuitive reasoning that understands, that the material world is eternally changing, and that reality is not a creation, but rather, *an effect of processes*. Thus, neither pleasure nor pain derived from material possessions last; but formed alongside, pleasure and pain are sides of the same coin. It is by renouncing both, through selfless action (inaction), that one can lead oneself to liberation.

This profound insight is one of source of the *Bhagavad Gita's* radiance, the 'Bhishma Parva,' or the sixth episode of the *Mahabharata*. Reckoned as one

of the five jewels of Sanskrit literature, it has a simple plot a discourse between two friends. Prince Arjuna, the brother of King Yudhisthira, and Krishna, the transcended one, wearing the disguise of a charioteer, talks to each other and us. The exchange unfolds in the midst of an impending war, in a war-chariot drawn up between the armies of the Kauravas, led by the wicked King Duryodhana and Pandavas, headed by King Yudhisthira, in the flat country that surrounds the city that is now the modern Delhi.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, or what Sir Edwin Arnold, English poet and journalist called *The Song Celestial*, is Krishna's advice to his cousin and childhood friend, prince Arjuna, while the impending war adds an extra dimension. As the war-chariot settles at the centre of the armies, the view from there creates a moral quandary for Arjuna.

The *Gita's* meaning unfolds at more than one level. On the simplest, it is in the advice to the son of Pandu, the prince Arjuna, who belongs to the warrior class of India. Arjuna's duty in life, therefore, is to fight against evil and fight for the right. His social duty demands him to defend his brothers in their legitimate claims against their wicked cousins. Hence, by custom, he is expected to defend the rights of his brother. However, the view from the centre of the gathered armies is a revelation that to earn a victory for his brothers he has to kill his own family, his cousins, grandfather, and even his teacher. Hence, Arjuna finds himself facing a crisis of conscience. He has spoken words that he should not have spoken, brave as he may be. As Arnold, describes it: when Arjuna arrives at the open ground between the armies, he says these words;

‘Krishna! as I behold, come here to shed their common blood, yon concourse of our kin, my members fail, my tongue dries in my mouth, a shudder thrills my body, and my hair bristles with horror; from my weak hand slips Gandiv, the goodly bow; a fever burns my skin to parching; hardly may I stand; the life within me seems to swim and faint; nothing do I foresee save woe and wail! It is not good, O Keshav!’

In other words, he cannot see any good coming out of the war. This deep crisis in conscience unsettles the balance of his body. From the centre of the gathered armies, he foresees the end of his clan, and as the Hindu chronology says, he predicts rightly. The end of the war marks the end of the Bronze Age

and the beginning of the Iron Age.

However, it should be taken into consideration that the Hindu chronology does not really follow the occidental; the times of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* do not, in fact, run parallel to the Western understanding of history. The turning point of an age in Hindu chronology is marked rather by the decline in *Dharma*, the veiling of the True Self, or the pure consciousness. *Dharma* is the essential nature of beings and things. According to the moral degeneration of the age, the essential nature of beings and things is veiled and becomes unrealisable even to the finest beings. *Dharma*, hence, is the inner bliss and tranquillity, the true cause of the sense of duty, and thus, is a virtue.

Valmiki, the ancient poet, who wrote the *Ramayana*, could talk about the perfect king during his time, because *Dharma* revealed itself in the phenomenal world. In other words, people lived their Real Self and, therefore, revealed their essential nature. Time, experienced as the pure consciousness, revealed its essential nature. Gods walked on this land. The time of the *Ramayana* is *Ideal*.

Nonetheless, Vyasa had to take into consideration the moral degeneration of his time and meditate upon the process of making the perfect king that is, the process of attaining *Dharma*. However, things degenerate further in Kaliyuga, our age, as John Algeo, former President of the Theosophical Society America, writes:

‘In Indian dice, *kali* is the one-spot; and to throw a *kali* is to lose the game—to crap out. So the Kaliyuga is the most degenerate era of history, the losing time. Arjuna foresees that the onset of the Kaliyuga will result from the battle.’

Kaliyuga is the age of Apparent Self, the ego. Hence, the one-spot, the ‘I,’ is the form of time. *Gita* unfolds during a period, when time itself is about to take a spin on its pedestal. *The Song Celestial*, thus, is a teaching for humanity, to arm itself against its own degeneration.

At another level, it is part of the Hindu metaphysics and cosmology. In this metaphysics, the Trinity is personified in the triple synthesis of time. First, Brahma is immoveable and eternal. It is the pure consciousness, the original

cause of creation. Secondly, Vishnu personifies the force that maintains the great cycles of time. Of the ten grand cycles, we live in *Kaliyuga*, the last cycle. Each cycle ends with one of his new incarnations, and Krishna is among them. The divine itself reoccurs in time, and for this reason, Vishnu also personifies the eternal reoccurrence of life. Life reoccurs until one realises the pure consciousness, the Real Self. He is the personification of the circular time.

The third element, Shiva, is the divine spark that tears the every passing unit of time; his dance at once destroys and creates worlds. The feminine force, personified as Adi Shakti, is the primal force, the all-pervasive primordial cosmic energy, the base of creation. In this metaphysic, things or states are transitory by nature; they are only snapshots of change in progress. From a modern standpoint, as Norbert Wiener, the mathematician and developer of cybernetics, for instance, has observed:

‘We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves.’

In such a system, pure consciousness, the blissful state, is not a property of space; but rather space is a *morphogenetic* field, a field of endless unfolding through modifications. If space is indeed a field of energy, then all rational forms unfolded in it are persuaded by irrational processes. In such a field of action, though pain is unavoidable, suffering is optional. In consequence too, the blissful state can only become an inner experience, the creative potential of one’s inner silence and liberation comes through a union with the inner silence. However, hindrances to one’s attainment of pure consciousness and eternal bliss attained through inner silence vary according to the moral state of an age. Then again, Gita says, devoid of the moral degeneration of the age, those who are armed with the deepest truth of the nature of reality would be compassionate to all the living things. As W. J. Johnson, the translator of *Gita* for the Oxford World’s Classics series, puts it:

‘For the supreme bliss comes to the yogin whose mind has grown calm, whose passion is stilled, who has become Brahman, without taint,’ and such an existence would see the same thing ‘in a wise and disciplined Brahmin as in a cow or an elephant, or even in a dog or an outcast.’

Dharma is action motivated by one's deep insight into the nature of time and causality. The time of the *Mahabharata* revolves around Krishna. He is the hinge, the pointed finger that spins his beloved weapon, the *Chakra*. When Arjuna and his grandfather, Bhishma fight each other during the war, they test the will and the patience of the time. Both men admire each other, and wouldn't desire to defeat one another. The battle goes on yet without conclusion, and thus, Krishna is forced to intervene, and attacks Bhishma. As he turns against Bhishma; *Chakra*, the absolute tyrant, time itself spins at his fingertip.

This incident from the epic offers an insight that would explain the nature of time and Dharma that Krishna embodies and their relation with each other. Throughout his life, he is a character that rejects the conventional morality. When Draupadi, the Pandavas wife, is dragged and ill-treated in the court, none of the great men present there reacted as they are confused, and thought the essence of Dharma hidden in its path is difficult to grasp. Besides the conventional morality taught them that the master is the lawful owner of the slave, and since Duryodhana won her and her five husbands as slaves in dice game, he has absolute authority over them.

However, Krishna does not have such hesitation, and he offers help as she needed it. Free from guilt and the traces of the conventional morality, Krishna shows the character of a visionary, and is willing to sacrifice his name and fame in his fight to end dark forces and establish a world of righteousness, a world of light.

Still, his moral principles are not imposed from outside, they are strictly not conventional morality. They are formed through his realisation of the true self, the untainted Brahma within. What Krishna sets into play is the difference between the 'written law' and the 'spirit of law.' The spirit of law is the *good-in-all*. However, law is dependent on context. Its essence changes with context; for this reason, no law is universally applicable. In the battlefield, when Drona asks the king Yudhishthira to inform him about the truth of his son's death, the king conforms to the conventional morality by clinging to the truth in word and lies in spirit. The king is upset because he does not want to lie to his teacher, even though Drona is fighting for a wrong cause – the victory of darkness.

On the other hand, when Krishna rushes towards Bhishma in the aforementioned context, he is breaking his vow of not fighting in the battle. Provoked by Duryodhana's incessant badgering that he is not sincere in battle; Bhishma is in a blind fury. Like a whirlwind, he destroys everything on his way, and this forced Krishna to ask Arjuna to stop him. And yet while encountering him, Krishna noticed that Arjuna is not striking back with all his heart. Breaking his vow, he leaps out of the chariot, holding a chariot wheel he picked up from the field. When Bhishma sees the approaching Krishna, he says to him: 'Come, come Krishna, and put an end to my life today.' Arjuna runs after Krishna and reminds him repeatedly that, if he does not stop, the world would call him a betrayer of his own word, a common liar. Still, Arjuna could only stop him after a furious struggle by holding on to his legs from behind and clinging on to them.

Throughout his life, Krishna does not follow the conventional morality once, but rather, he acts according to a higher morality that is derived from self realization, and therefore, his actions are not prompted by greed, by anger, by vengeance, by jealousy, by bitterness and resentment, by intolerance. Valmiki portrays the man as someone whose consciousness is steadily rooted in Brahma – as a *sthitaprajna*. He is time's inner silence, its untainted and pure consciousness.

As time's inner silence and its will, he is the divine witness and the measure of the virtues of the time. Though great men fought this battle, they show weakness. Drona decides to fight to protect his son; Yudhisthira is slow in grasping the meaning of dharma; Arjuna is emotional; Bheema is a 'foodie'; Bhishma is preoccupied with his image as the martyr, the self-sacrificer. As an incorruptible man of total integrity, he enters into the war to keep his vow that he would always stand with the ruler of the land. So, though unwilling in spirit, he fights for the evil. Besides, his narcissistic obsession with his image fails him to guide his grandchildren away from wrong doings.

And therefore, what Arjuna foresees as being the end, is in Krishna's vision, only a transition and a beginning. In this way, his intervention into the affairs of this world itself is a selfless act aimed to run the transition smoothly. What the *Gita* offers us is his way of life.

The *Gita's* stress on selfless action (inaction), directed towards transition and new beginnings, takes political form in modern times in the life of Mahatma Gandhi. And Gandhi was introduced to the *Gita* by the theosophists, while his reading of Henry David Thoreau's essay 'On Civil Disobedience' in turn inspired his policy of passive resistance (or *Satyagraha*). Inspired in turn by Gandhi's policy, Martin Luther King created his own program of non-violence. This underlines that in an increasingly interconnected and complex world such as ours, works like the *Gita* or the *Tao Te Ching* offer guidance for cultivating the self. Politics today strongly demands clean minds and selfless action, and it demands from us leaders and thinkers, who can foresee a future beyond caste, class, race, gender, religion and nation, and lay down strategies to achieve a better future for all.

If the historical myth of *Gita* is a discourse between two friends at the turning point of a golden age in the background of an ancient civil war, then the archetypal myth of *Gita* speaks about our inner struggle.

After deep introspection, *Gita* locates the spirits of the microcosm and the macrocosm as identical. It teaches us that the human spirit and the universal spirit that pervades the phenomenal world are nothing but the same. This deep insight primarily hints that life on this planet is neither the work of an alien force nor an accident. Alan Watts, the Twentieth century British-born American philosopher, known as an interpreter and populariser of Eastern philosophy, suggests in the seminar titled 'The Nature of Consciousness' that neither the *ceramic model* (meaning the kind of world imagined in the book of Genesis, where the world is given as an artefact; the creator, God imposes his will on the primordial matter, clay, and breathes life in it, and thereby, it is informed and its intelligence therefore is granted by an external energy and an external intelligence) nor the fully automatic model of the world (in such a model, the world is created by a dumb energy, through natural selection and evolution. Darwin developed such an understanding of the world), gives an adequate myth or an image in terms of which we can make sense of the world. Hence, in order to manage our sensations and our feelings, we need a most sensible image of the world.

On the other hand, in the Oriental myth the universe is a self-contained

intelligent process, and as Watts puts it playfully, if the earth is a grand apple tree, then its fruit is life. *Gita* calls this pure consciousness the *Brahma*. Self-contained bliss, purity and indestructibility are its qualities. Just as the entire sun is reflected at once in perfect miniatures in each and every dewdrop, *Brahma* is omnipresent and perfect. It is like the salt of the great oceans that can only be tasted, but cannot physically be located. *Brahma* residing within each of us is our Real Self, the source of inner peace, harmony, perfection and the blissful state.

Those who realise the state of *Brahma* from within would see the world from its point of view, and this is the reason why, Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu, maintainer of the great circles of time, is the divine witness.

Like the *Great Tao*, *Brahma*, or the Real Self, is devoid of all qualities; it lacks sound, taste, form, smell and touch, and, for that reason, it does not act, and is not an agency. Self-contained and undivided, it is not a sense of itself. *Brahma* is the Real and the only perfect. It is inaction, selfless action. Those who achieve this state enjoy mental tranquillity and freedom. It is the reason why, Krishna tells Arjuna: ‘The learned do not mourn’ and advises him to ‘be thyself,’ which means, to realise his essential nature, the Real Self. *Dharma*, then, is this self-realisation, and the sense of duty derived from one’s self-realisation. The sage lives in the Real Self. Unconscious of the worldly phenomena, it is his night and his day is the Real Self. For ordinary people, their day is the worldly phenomena, and unconscious of their Real Self, it becomes their night.

However, our emotional investment and fidelity is in a transitory reality, which is, *Gita* warns, a hindrance to self-realisation. From his different standpoint, Heraclitus too directs our attention to the unpredictability of the phenomenal world. He writes:

‘As they step into the same rivers, other and still other waters flow upon them.’

In Hindu tradition, the mind-body complex is the apparent Self. In a field of energy, when fading connections link body and mind, ephemeral points emit apparition. The apparent Self is such an emission. The sense of ‘I,’ the doer takes form, when one synthesises from a field of relations, a sense of the

world, my world. Produced at once with the synthesis, it offers itself as apparition. When the mind senses itself as the body, the sense of 'I,' or the doer is a disguise that projects itself at once with an ego.

With the sense of doer, there is a receiver. However, neither the receiver nor the doer is real, rather both of them are apparitions formed in a temporal unfolding that involves the body located in space and mind unfolding in time. Since the space is infused with energy, it removes objectivity from intentionality. Hence, both the doer and the receiver becomes a difference in degree in a field of feelings, and emotions that essentially sets that field to change. In this field of continuous interpretation and evaluation, as one identifies oneself in that field as agency, the selfless act or the inaction that the *Gita* advocates does not take place. In contrast, the 'I' or the doer links one into the causal chain.

With the apparent Self, the Real Self, the form of selfless action, is veiled into the depth within. In one fragment, Heraclitus writes, 'Nature loves to hide.' This veiling of nature is due to our indisposition to know ourselves. We fundamentally lack insight into ourselves.

Heraclitus also hints: 'Not comprehending, they hear like the deaf. The saying is their witness: absent while present.' Adding, 'Not understanding how to listen, they do not know how to speak.' Ordinary life, for this reason, is an eternally unfolding drama, a play of light and shadow, on which neither the doer nor the receiver has authority. In contrast, the Real Self, like the sun in Plato's cave allegory, is the true source of light. In *Gita*, Krishna sees the world as its light; he is the form of inaction. As the personification of the formless, as the Real Self, he is omnipresent and perfect, inner bliss is his state; and therefore, *Gita* sees him as the divine spark within us.

Ordinary life is trapped in the clutches of likes and dislikes, which are effects of a process that involves differentiation and separation. Since it is a process, its qualities are shaped by the past. However, the past takes form through the adding up of dreams and imaginations into the lived experience. This addition itself is nothing but a process. *The Song Celestial* tells that beings pass through various wombs according to their contacts in this world. In this way of thinking, they really do. Moreover, beings are conceived here as becoming.

Still, to become a process, that is to institute change in progress, there must be a stable foundation. *Brahma*, the Real Self, provides the necessary foundation. It is pure, subtle, omnipresent, and indestructible, and consequently, it is a blissful state. Even then though, it does not change with the ceaseless change, the change in progress veils it within us.

Maya is the veil of our true nature. This veil essentially is that of the world of name and form. It is neither an illusion nor a mirage but an obstacle that hides the Reality. Thick strata of desire, inhibitions, values that clouds the sun within us, a golden lid that covers the face of the Truth. Otto Pflieger sites Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the foundering figure of the movement known as German Idealism in *The Philosophy of Religion on the Basis of its History*:

‘Our seeing itself hides the object we see; our eye itself impedes our eye.’

Reality is not actually seen with the eye, but with the eye of the spirit, which means, we haven’t yet touched the reality. Gandhi in his interpretation of the *Gita*, writes:

‘The reality at the back, the substance of which the diversity is but the shadow, is seen not with the eye of flesh, but with the eye of the spirit.’

Or, as Heraclitus tells it: ‘our senses are liars.’ Camille Flammarion, the nineteenth century French writer and enthusiastic astronomer, for instance illustrates how they are so:

"We see the sun rise above the horizon; it is beneath us. We touch what we think is a solid body; there is no such thing (as a solid body). We hear harmonious sounds; but the air has only brought us silently undulations that are silent themselves. We admire the effects of light and of the colours that bring vividly before our eyes the splendid scenes of Nature; but, in fact, there is no light, there are no colours. It is the movement of opaque ether striking on our optic nerve which gives us the impression of light and colour. We burn our foot in the fire: it is not the foot that pains us; it is in our brain only that the feeling of being burned resides. We speak of heat and cold; there is neither heat nor cold in the universe, only motion. Thus, our senses mislead us as to the reality of objects around us."

Reality lies behind the world of name and form, and the ancients called it

Brahma. The divine light breaks up while passing through the world of name and form, just like when light passing through the prism breaks up into colour rays. It seems, as Gandhi says: ‘The prism is the gross medium of our fleshly senses.’ Hence, the world is nothing but a reflection of the *Absolute*, the *Brahma* (*Brahma*, at this point, is neither god nor concept, it is rather pure consciousness, devoid of qualities). Realising the true Self, the *Brahma* is at once the relief from the physical and psychological bondage of the world of senses.

On the other hand, diversity is the *Maya* of the true Self. *Maya* that brings forth all things is the primordial nature as the feminine force. Its relation with *Brahma*, *purusha*, parallels the *yin* and *yang* of Chinese philosophy. *Brahma* is the universal Self, but when reflected in the *maya* of *prakriti*, appears as individual soul. Though in itself unconscious, *maya* dwells consciousness, and in this metaphysics, the pure consciousness is the *Brahma*. All forms take form through the play of these primal poles, *prakriti* and *purusha*. However, none can predict what might have triggered those primordial elements to initiate a process that led to the birth of the universe. And still, with such a system, it can be intuited that the universe is an organic unfolding.

Interconnected by nature, *Maya* unfolds alone with *Brahma*. Hence, the white radiance of eternity, the *Brahma* reflected and diffracted is the world of senses. Algeo writes:

‘Each of us is a consciousness (*purusha*) functioning through material forms (*prakriti*) —a reflection of the one pure consciousness in the matter of *prakriti*.’

In the non-dualist, *advaita* school of Hindu philosophy, the *Brahma* is the only real; god, as its personifications, are only masks that would direct one to self-realisation and to the state of *Brahma*, the real Self. In the theistic devotional movement (*Bhakti*) developed in medieval Hinduism, devotees choose deities on their path to self-realisation, according to their spiritual and emotional state. However, liberation from the causal chain and the self-suffering inflicted by it are the ultimate goal of all mysticism.

Gita teaches both these tradition: one based on devotion and the other through intuitive reasoning of the real Self or *Brahma*. The first path, of selfless

action, involves agency as here the devotee disciplines the mind through the devotion to a script or a great teacher. Here the Great War becomes our inner struggle for self-realisation. In this struggle, Arjuna is us, our individual selves; Krishna the omnipresent; and the blind king Dhrtarastra the mind under the spell of *Maya* (or ignorance). Since one could observe that each character in the epic is unique, the blind king's hundred sons, the Kauravas, embody as numerous evil tendencies of human mind.

Imitating human experiences, *Gita* unfolds in multiple layers. It starts with the blind King Dhrtarastra's exchange with his charioteer, Sanjaya, who tells the unfolding events at the battlefield using his intuitive perception. It contains the images, noise and the rhythms of the battlefield from various angles, including Arjuna's vision from the war-chariot settled at the centre of the gathering. His moral quandary, when he sees the good peoples gathered on both sides, Krishna's discourses with his friend and, Duryodhana exchanges with the teacher, Drona and his allies create a kaleidoscopic and intense visualisation. *Gita* suggests, if one could follow with *devotion* the divine spark then one would eventually master the mind and attain self-realisation.

The second path taps an innate intelligence that *Gita* calls *Buddhi* - the faculty of intuition and understanding. *Buddhi* pervades the microcosm and the macrocosm, and is innate to both the individual spirit and the universal spirit. It is insight, and is with such insight that we can at last identify and negate the apparent self and realise the True Self. Here the negation, however, is not dialectical. It is not the negation of negation, as systematised by Hegel and the later Marxists but rather, grown in a vibe of inner bliss, it is an absolute negation. This would liberate such an existent from the play of causality that link and differentiate the self and the other.

By transcending the play of causality, the material becomes the source of a spiritual awakening. Negating the apparent self thus affirms the whole. By affirming the whole, such an existent transcends the past, and life becomes a pure play. The *Bhagavad Gita* reveals that the one who has realised the true Self requires no further scripture or teacher.

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