Dr. Edwin Bryant offers us a tour of the historical and religious landscape of the Bhagavad Gita in this interview, including a view of its influence on Thoreau, Emerson, Mahatma Gandhi and its relevance for Yoga students and teachers.

Integral Yoga Magazine: Can you please create a context for us in which we can understand the Gita and its war-like setting?

Edwin Bryant: We first need to understand the Gita in its context as part of the world’s largest epic, the one hundred-verse Mahabharata. The Gita, with its war-like language occurs about halfway through the epic. As the Gita begins, we learn what will result in a gory, gruesome war is about to erupt. We’re not about to read the Sermon on the Mount or the Buddha’s Deer Park sermon! All the known kings of the time are gathered—there are even references to Chinese troops, and to Greek and Hun forces.

Whether or not this is historically true, the epic presents itself with martial imagery and phraseology because it occurs in the midst of a world war. Arjuna isn’t a disciple giving up everything to follow Buddha or Christ. He’s a six-foot eight tall invincible warrior. Krishna himself is a kshatriya prince. The narrative is not about turning the other cheek. This can be quite a surprise to someone picking up the Gita for the first time and thinking it will be a pacifist type spiritual text and finding it reads like the script for Mel Gibson’s Braveheart! [Laughter]

IYM: What is the Gita’s relationship to other scriptural texts of Hinduism?

EB: As I said, it is part of the Mahabharata, so its context and some of its rhetoric is epic. But it is sometimes called the Gita Upanishad, because a good part of its content is Upanishadic; there are Upanishadic teachings throughout the Gita, and one can find there verses identical to some in the, for example, Katha Upanishad. That is why the Gita was appropriated by the scholastic Vedanta tradition.

Vedanta (along with the Yoga tradition) is one of the six orthodox schools of philosophy or darshanas that came out of the Upanishadic period. The Vedanta tradition set as its goal the clarifying of the Upanishads. That is what Vedanta is: scriptural interpretation or hermeneutics. Unlike Yoga, which is based on experiential insight, Vedanta is based on scriptural analysis. The Vedanta Sutras, written by Badarayana, is all about how to interpret the Upanishads in a consistent fashion. (Does he succeed? No, he creates another cryptic text that itself requires interpretation such that it gave rise to a number of different schools of Vedanta such as advaita, visishtadvaita, bhedabheda, dvaitadvaita, shuddhadvaita and dvaita). In any event, Vedanta, as a cluster of sub-traditions, focuses on three texts: the Upanishads, the Vedanta Sutras and the Gita (known as the Prasthanatrayi Grantha) for the sole purpose of clarifying the Upanishads. So the Gita spans both the epic and philosophical genres.

IYM: When was the Gita first translated into English?

EB: The first translation of the Gita was issued in England in 1785 by Sir Charles Wilkins, but it was a long time before it was noticed. Eventually, as a growing western presence developed in India, traders and colonial administrators became interested in understanding Indians and Indian culture. Colonialists were looking for the one book, one prophet model with which they were familiar in Christianity and Islam, and in India they were faced with what seemed an exotic chaos and confusion of sects, traditions, gods and scriptures.

They wanted some single identifiable source they could cling to as to what Hindus believed so that they could interact with them and, eventually, better rule them. (That’s not to say that some British weren’t sincere humanists who believed, at least from their own frames of reference, that they could help Indians). So, some of the Brahmins said that the Gita was important and the British latched on to that. That is how it became referred to, for a period, by some British, as the “bible of India.” Of course, there is no one “bible” in India, but a wide variety of texts that are authoritative to different communities.

IYM: What brought it to more prominence in the West?

EB: There was not much reaction to the Gita from westerners until much later, when it was discovered by Romanticists and Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau, and even then, the interest was not widespread but centered in intellectual circles of this kind. Their interest was still an abstract interest, and the Gita became detached from its Hindu context and read as a confirmation of the perennial philosophy or truth underlying all religions, as espoused by such thinkers.

This was similar to its reading by the theosophists, who also later paid attention to the Gita. Another stream of western interest came from Christian scholars. Some, at least, felt that the Gita was asking the right questions, but that, while it had admirable theistic and other merits, it
did not have the right answers (which could only be found in Christ's revelations). As an aside, while Europeans in general could relate to the Krishna of the Gita, they couldn't relate to the Krishna of the Puranas, the Krishna of the gopis (his female devotees).

**IYM:** How did the Hindus feel about western appreciation or critique of the Gita?

**EB:** Many Hindu nationalists and apologists were prepared to jettison much of their tradition (specifically, the Puranic content dealing with the stories of the great divinities of Siva, Vishnu and the Goddess), but they jumped onto the Gita as a kind of text around which they could rally much more easily than the Kali Tantra or the Gopi Leela. Hinduism had come under attack by westerners. Hindus wanted to show missionaries—who were criticizing their Puranic notions of divinity as having elephant's head, multiple arms or cavorting with other men's wives—that Hinduism also had a "rational" side—the Upanishads and the Gita.

Hinduism had been represented as useless mythological, other-worldly and as the reason why India was so chaotic. The British, however, could relate to the Karma Yoga of the Gita—the work ethic of doing one's duty. They could also relate to the Upanishadic portion—that there is a soul distinct from the body—and they could relate to the basic teachings of the bhakti portion, surrender to God. While Europeans couldn't accept Krishna as God, they recognized that the Gita contained some kinds of theistic truth, even as they felt Christianity was the higher truth. So there was some appreciation of the Gita. The result of this was Hindu prioritizing and popularizing the Gita more than might have been the case in pre-modern India, and the text's centrality outside of India as representative of Hinduism also becoming enhanced.

**IYM:** Is this why the Gita became popularized in America too?

**EB:** Gurus like Swami Satchidananda and Srila Prabhupada, who arrived in the West in the 1960s, came from that apologetic, nationalistic milieu. They presented the Gita as a scripture of which they could be proud, and it became central to them. When they came to the America, they brought various teachings—including, of course, Yoga, which was to become the most visibly successful—and the Gita was part of this package of exported Hinduism. Currently, the Gita is the most commonly translated text from India, with the biggest circulation in the West of any Hindu scripture. I recall reading that there are now over well over 300 non-Indian language translations.

**IYM:** Why do some say the battlefield of the Gita is symbolic, not historical?

**EB:** This notion of it being symbolic comes from the Theosophists who were looking for the universal, perennial truths underlying all religions, and thus typically depicted the surface or historical context of religions as symbolic. History has passed Theosophy by, somewhat, but they were very important players in pre-independence India. This type of reading was then picked up by Mahatma Gandhi as a nice, post-enlightenment way of looking at the Gita.

The idea that the five Pandavas represent the five senses, for example, was picked up by Gandhiji from Theosophy. He read the Gita every day, but for him, the Gita practically ended at Chapter Two. Fifty percent of his commentary is on Chapter Two. He wasn't interested in the bhakti elements and, because of his nonviolence ethic, what was he going to do with the violent setting of the Gita? He appropriated the theosophic notion of the symbolism of the war. While one can appreciate how this may have worked well for Gandhiji's non-violence agenda, one should be clear that such symbolic readings are modern readings; they are not the pre-modern traditional or classical understanding of the text.

**IYM:** In your view, what is the Gita's central theme?

**EB:** Krishna is consciously drawing on the main things going on in the religious landscape of the time and subsuming these under bhakti. The Mahabharata occurs at a time when Vedic dharma is under attack by both non-Vedic traditions and by ascetic traditions within the Vedic fold. While Vedic ritualism remains the mainstream religious activity of the time, this is also a period in which
ascetic, meditative traditions were coming to the fore. The questions in the Gita of action rather than non-action are posed in this climate.

Krishna re-affirms the value of varnashram dharma (the various orders of life including student, householder, sannyasi) with each of its associated actions and duties, in other words, of action in the world rather than renunciation of it. He is presenting a spiritual path that combines atma jnana (wisdom of the Self) with a work ethic. While Krishna puts forth a strong Karma Yoga message, the ultimate message (as revealed in 18.66 and throughout) is bhakti—surrender to Krishna. Even though some may find the notion of God as Krishna challenging to their own religious sensitivities, the Gita’s ultimate message is surrender to a personal God.

IYM: Do you think some may be uncomfortable with this overly bhakti message?

EB: Well, we all bring our own theological baggage to reading a text like the Gita. If you are not interested in Bhakti Yoga, the Gita also presents an atma-based worldview embedded within a paradigm of working in the world without attachment and without incurring karma—Karma Yoga. So if you choose to avoid the bhakti part, Jnana Yoga and Karma Yoga are strong sub-messages of the Gita. But bhakti is the ultimate message.

It’s clear that the Gita focuses much more on Ishwara (God) than did the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. Patanjali promotes Ishwara in a more optional way. The Gita is a more in-your-face theism. Krishna is unambiguously asserting his supremacy. Patanjali’s Ishwara remains unidentified, and therefore you can plug in the God of your choice. But Krishna asserts he is Ishwara, and this is more challenging to western religious sensitivities. So there’s a lot of material in the Gita. It has Jnana Yoga (the atma discourses), Karma Yoga (dutiful selfless action), sections on Raja Yoga (classical Patanjalian Yoga) and much else, but the fact is that the text consciously subsumes all this under bhakti, which might be more challenging to some. It’s a more forceful theism than Patanjali, though both are theistic texts.

IYM: Could you contrast the message of the Gita in relation to the Yoga Sutras?

EB: As I said, there is a jnana message in the Gita—that there is an atma, a Self—and a section in Chapter Six dealing with Patanjalian meditative Yoga; but this latter sub-theme in the Gita. Patanjali dedicates his entire text to providing a process to realize this atma (Parusha) in his Yoga Sutras. Patanjali is ascetic in his approach and fairly extreme. Yogas chitta vritti nirodha. Right in his opening verses Patanjali informs us that his project will be to teach us how to realize the Parusha soul by stopping thinking all-together! That’s about as radical as you can get! The Gita offers a more world-friendly, social-system friendly, career and relationship friendly option. It’s a less intimidating option that talks about realizing the Parusha (soul) in the context of action without personal desire and, ultimately higher than that, action as an offering to God, which is bhakti. The Gita allows us to remain in the world and to function in the world. We can maintain our social duties, maintain our relationships but subsume or engage those in Yoga.

Edwin Bryant, Ph.D. taught Hinduism at Harvard University for three years, and is currently at Rutgers University, where he teaches courses on Hindu philosophy and religion. He has received numerous awards and fellowships, published six books and authored a number of articles on Vedic history, Yoga and the Krishna tradition. His forthcoming translation of and commentary on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (North Point Press, a division of Farrar, Straus & Giroux) will be available summer 2007. For more information, please visit: www.edwinbryant.com.
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