



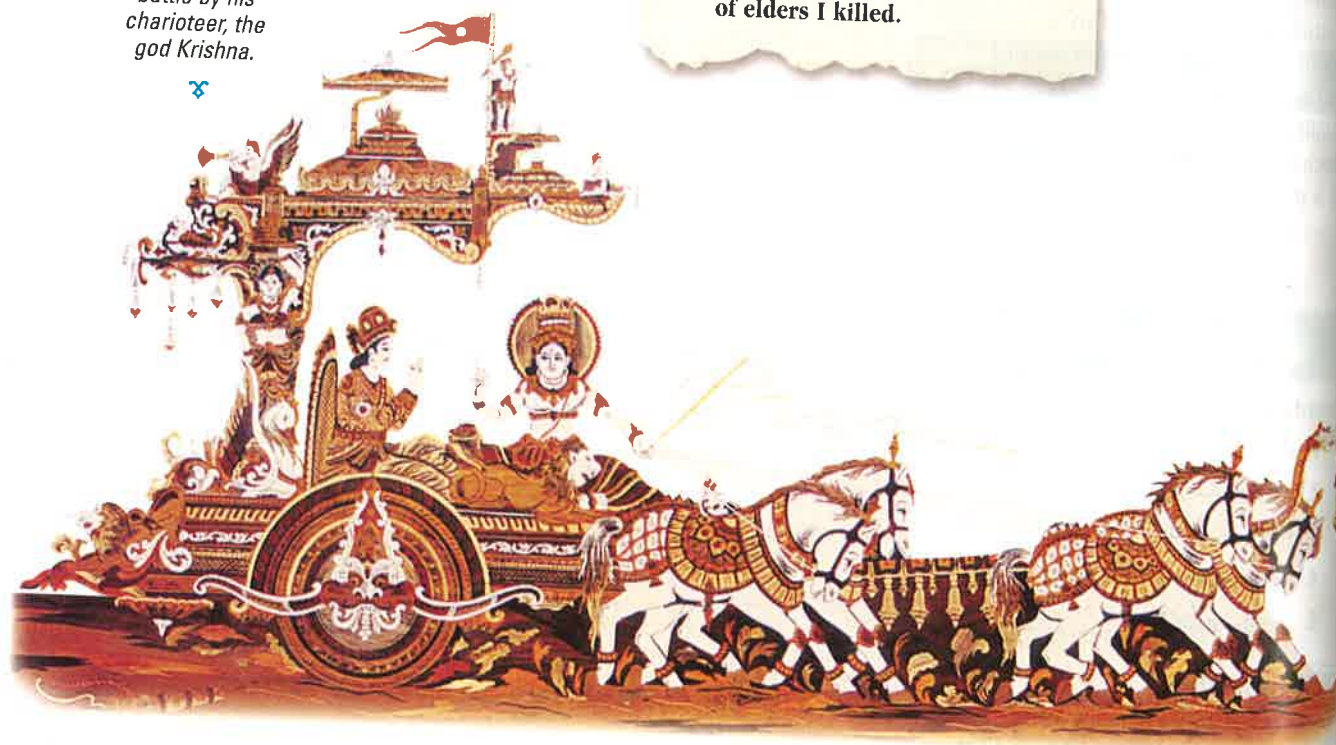
## Bhagavad-Gita

The *Bhagavad-Gita* (bŭg'ə-vəd-gē'tā)—literally, “song of the Lord”—is the most beloved and most widely translated religious work in India. Consisting of an 18-chapter episode in the *Mahabharata*, it begins on the eve of battle as the warrior-prince Arjuna sees his uncles, cousins, friends, and teachers lined up on the field against him. Overcome with grief, Arjuna suddenly refuses to fight. Mentioning his great-uncle and his teacher by name, he cries out in despair:

Krishna, how can I fight  
against Bhishma and Drona  
with arrows  
when they deserve my worship?

It is better in this world  
to beg for scraps of food  
than to eat meals  
smeared with the blood  
of elders I killed.

Below:  
Arjuna is led into  
battle by his  
charioteer, the  
god Krishna.



Over the next 700 verses, the god Krishna explains to Arjuna the universal truth about existence and teaches him how to understand and act on that truth. Through a series of questions and answers, the *Gita* defines the basic ideas of Hindu philosophy.

One of these ideas is that of *dharma*, or sacred duty. Each of the four social classes—priests, warriors, tradespeople, and servants—has specific duties, which must be upheld to maintain the social and cosmic order. As a warrior, Arjuna has a sacred duty to fight—and to kill if necessary.

Another concept central to Hindu belief is that of reincarnation, or rebirth in another form. The cycle of death and rebirth depends on a person's actions, or *karma*, in each life. For example, by committing a crime, a person would generate negative karma that he or she would have to work through in the next life—say, by becoming the victim of another's crime. But as Arjuna's dilemma shows, following *dharma* (his duty as a soldier) can create negative *karma* (killing members of his own family). “Conflicting sacred duties confound my reason,” Arjuna laments in the *Gita*. It also seems that one can never escape the cycle of death and rebirth or the suffering it involves.

But Krishna gives answers to Arjuna's dilemma. First, he reminds Arjuna that although the body dies, the spirit lives on eternally:

Our bodies are known to end,  
but the embodied self is enduring,  
indestructible, and immeasurable;  
therefore, Arjuna, fight the battle!

Krishna then offers two ways to achieve *moksha*, or union with God and release from the cycle of reincarnation. The first way is to do one's duty without feeling attached to the results—to act without desire, in other words. For Arjuna, this means fighting the battle but taking no personal responsibility for its success or failure. Whatever happens will be God's will.

The other path to enlightenment is through meditation. Krishna tells Arjuna that by disciplining the mind to withdraw completely from the senses and fix itself on a single point, one can realize union with God. But even for the truly devout, this supreme goal may require many births to attain. Fortunately, there is the *Bhagavad-Gita* to show the way.



National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Above:  
The *Bhagavad-Gita*  
influenced the  
19th-century  
American writer  
Henry David Thoreau.

Below:  
New translations of  
the *Bhagavad-Gita*  
continue to be written.

