

How to talk to an avatar: Krishna and Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita

He who shall study this sacred dialogue of ours, by him I shall have been worshipped with the wisdom sacrifice; such is My conviction. Even one who hears it with faith and free from malice, he also, liberated, shall attain the happy worlds of those whose actions are pure.

-- Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, 18.70-71

IN THIS CLASS we will be reading and discussing the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the most widely read and translated religious texts in human history. The *Gita* is a conversation between Krishna, one of the *avatars* (incarnations) of the God Vishnu, and his friend Arjuna, a young prince and master archer. This conversation is embedded within a much longer epic called the *Mahabharata*, a sprawling story of family conflict, betrayal, and battle that is read and performed throughout India to this day. In this story, Arjuna's cousins have stolen the kingdom that rightfully belongs to him and his brothers. Although they have tried everything possible to maintain family honor and connection in the face of this betrayal, they have been forced into open warfare. Arjuna and Krishna stand on the battlefield, about to go to war with cousins, uncles, beloved teachers and old friends. In this moment of despair and almost certain death, Arjuna turns to Krishna for help. He receives teachings not only on how to face the looming battle, but on the nature of the Self and ultimate reality.

REQUIRED ASSIGNMENTS:

READ this excerpt from the *Bhagavad Gita*.

READ an article on *dharma* by Sally Kempton: A former swami and author of *Meditation for the Love of It* discusses the meaning of the Sanskrit term *dharma*.

CONTEMPLATE the question: *what is my dharma?* You can engage this contemplation from all three of the perspectives that Sally Kempton suggests: *dharma* as duty or ethical imperative, *dharma* as personal life calling, and *dharma* as spiritual path. Use your journal to help you uncover what your own understanding of *dharma* is.

OPTIONAL:

READ this excerpt from *Poised for Grace* by Douglas Brooks: In this commentary, a contemporary scholar/practitioner offers insights on the *Bhagavad Gita* from a tantric (i.e. world-valuing) perspective.

WATCH THE MOVIE *The Legend of Bagge Vance*, a modern re-write of the plot of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

FOR A REAL TREAT, read William Buck's *Mahabharata* over Thanksgiving or winter break!