

Chapter 2 of the *Bhagavad Gita*: The Yoga of Understanding

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In the first chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna faces the realities of war and finds himself wanting.ⁱ Arjuna's training has focused on the skill and art of warfare. He is the greatest archer of his time and through his sense of duty has been challenged to put his skills to the test in defending good against evil. But Arjuna finds the call to action and the glories of war are not the inspirational reality they've been cracked up to be. On the battlefield of life Arjuna finds himself unprepared and filled with doubts fueled by opposing dictates of heart and mind. He focuses on fearful and negative outcomes and his pleading arguments to Krishna, his charioteer and mentor, are perfect contradictions of feelings and logic. They run into a dead end and serve only to heighten his bewilderment on the right course of action to take. Failing to arrive at any kind of an answer, Arjuna follows the path of sorrow, "*It would be better if the sons of Dhritarashtra, weapons in hand should slay me, unresisting and unarmed in battle.*" He casts aside his bow and arrows and in complete despair, crumples onto the seat of his chariot. He refuses to fight. The warrior has hit rock bottom. But it's all up from here. He's open to the Lord's song.

In early verses of chapter 2 Krishna seizes the opportunity to offer hope. Hope and fulfillment are the benedictions of this chapter. Krishna gives a practical and direct approach to liberation from bondage to action and evolution to higher levels of spiritual and material wellbeing by offering a complete vision of the Absolute and relative aspects of life through both philosophical and practical traditions. The philosophical aspects come first (2.00 - 2.38) and bring a clear and foundational understanding of the separate natures of Absolute and relative fields of life. Through the practical aspect (2.45 - 2.72), Arjuna learns how the two fields of life, though entirely separate, can be simultaneously lived, each in the full glory of the other. This union is called Yoga.

The *Bhagavad Gita* has a heart. And that heart lies within this chapter. The heart beats strongest in verses 2.39 – 2.72. And the heart of hearts lies in verses 2.45 – 2.48 where it infuses energy into all subsequent verses and chapters.

The focus of this commentary is on the practice of Karma Yoga, and not its philosophical underpinnings. However, philosophy provides a solid foundation on which to build the

practice. So the commentary begins with a summary of the philosophy as expounded by Krishna. This exegesis intends to take the reader to the level of understanding achieved by Arjuna in 2.39 and provide the springboard for jumping into the understanding of Yoga which follows. For readers interested in detail I refer them to the excellent translation and commentary by Maharishi Mahesh Yoga referenced in the footnote. The same advice goes for chapter 1, the setup.

2.00 – 2.38 Philosophical understanding as it applies to the practice of Karma Yoga as developed by Krishna in this second chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

- 1) There are two aspects of life: the ever-changing outer self and the never-changing inner Self. The physical ever-changing reality is perishable. The spiritual never-changing Self is imperishable and Absolute. Your Absolute aspect is eternal and lies outside the human construct of time. You just *are*. Period!
- 2) Do not fear death. The perishable perishes. You do not. You are far more than you think you are. You have inherited a potential to liberate yourself from the bondage of action and achieve the highest levels of spiritual and material wellbeing.
- 3) Do your duty. Failing to act you will retard evolution, yours and the world's. Acting in accord with duty you will attain the highest levels liberation regardless of outcome, victory or defeat. "*Stand up, resolved to fight.*" Uplift all.

Here, where Krishna shifts gears from philosophical to practical, the commentary on Yoga begins in earnest.

2.39 *That which has been set before you is understanding in terms of Samkhya; hear it now in terms of [the practice of] Yoga. Your intellect established through it, you will cast away the binding influence of action [cast away the bondage of karma].*

This verse is pivotal and critical to gaining understanding and experience of Karma Yoga advanced in the remainder of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Here, Krishna shifts gears from theoretical to practical, from understanding to experience, from the philosophy of Samkhya to the practice of Karma Yoga. Understanding opens doors; experience walks us through. Brought together in this verse, the remainder of the *Gita* wends like a river

through the varied landscape of life and conflict to the sea of eternal knowledge where understanding and experience merge into one.

The happy marriage of understanding and experience: To move us forward along our path of evolution to higher levels of spiritual and material wellbeing requires both understanding and experience. They support and enliven each other.

Understanding opens the door and shines forward the light of possibilities. But understanding by itself is insufficient to move forward. Experience moves us forward. But without understanding gained along the way, experience feels isolated and directionless; *sans* understanding, we stumble along, at best. Understanding pulls experience out of isolation, gives it direction and makes it real. In turn, experience verifies understanding and deepens it. Deeper understanding infuses forward momentum into experience. Taken together, understanding and experience align themselves and move us along our path of evolution to higher levels of spiritual and material wellbeing.

‘That which has been set before you is understanding in terms of Samkhya.’ According to the philosophy of Samkhya, we are eternal (2.12 - 2.15). We neither begin nor end. We just are, conscious beings existing outside time in the eternal present, with neither beginning nor ending. We can’t be snuffed out. The take-home: Do not fear death; your life is more than you know it to be. While comforting for Arjuna to hear, this is just unrealized philosophical understanding. Not one to dawdle and leave Arjuna hanging, Krishna immediately backs up understanding of eternity with experience of it.

‘Hear it now in terms of Yoga.’ The practice of Karma Yoga brings to fruition the philosophy of Samkhya. Having extolled the virtues of eternal life, Krishna turns to the practice of it. In the practice of Karma Yoga — serving the desires of others — we naturally renounce our own desires, free ourselves from attachments and experience the eternal present. Living only in the present we gain equanimity of intellect, experience balance of mind and live 200% of life, 100% lower, outer self and 100% higher, inner Self.

What does ‘Yoga’ mean? Yoga is as union of lower self with higher Self. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna delineates self from Self. The lower self is ever-changing,

perishable; the higher self is never-changing, imperishable, eternal. The lower self is bounded individuality; the higher Self is unbounded universality. The lower self lives in time (or perhaps creates time as system to organize our nows) and gets things done; the higher Self lives outside the passage of time and just is, eternally content in its unbounded contentment.

Not having yet realized nature of the Self, self and Self play tug of war with our attention, with inner and outer mind. We feel imbalanced. Though we instinctively know there is something more harmonious to life, we just can't reach it. Conflicts and frustrations arise between knowing there's something more and not living it. Infrequently, life is smooth and rewarding. We more often scratch across the grooves than find ourselves merrily tapping our foot in one. We seldomly experience the lower self in harmony with higher Self. And here's the rub: we all know contentment lies within but we just can't reach it of our own accord.

In answer to questions about conflicts and frustrations, Yoga raises its hand. Having philosophically established inner and outer aspects of life, Krishna turns to hands-on and addresses the practice of Karma Yoga. In its practice we achieve union through action, hence Karma (action) Yoga (union). We gain unbounded freedom on the level of individuality. Deep within we live in peace and contentment (Self) while simultaneously on the surface level we engage in all life's activities (self). In union we live freed from conflict, frustration and suffering, our intellect established in Yoga, established in union.

Established intellect: *'Your intellect established through it.'* Intellect rules the roost. Intellect discerns what is real and true. Without *'established intellect'* we're lost and directionless. Through the practice of Karma Yoga, we purify and strengthen intellect, and realize the ultimate reality and truth: in my very nature I am unbounded contentment of Self. By definition, unbounded includes all that is bound. Having experienced the unbounded nature of Self, the bounded lower self naturally unites with it. United, conflicts and frustrations of inner and outer fall away. We no longer rely on actions to attain happiness and contentment through material possessions. We don't have to. Content deep within we remain at peace and on that level, do not act at all. No action, no binding influence of it. We *'cast away the binding influence of action.'* We achieve balance of inner and outer, balance of mind. Verses 2.45 and 2.47 detail the

mechanics of realizing the higher Self, achieving union of lower self with it and establishing intellect.

Binding influence of action: We become bound (attached) to our actions when desire contacts the senses with attractive qualities found in objects of sensory experience. The sight of a spiffy new Porsche, touch of silk, enchanting music, alluring scent of perfume, the feel of new running shoes ... capture our attention and pull the inner mind out into the ever-changing, relative field of life. In a sense, desire suckers the weak mind into thinking we've arrived — that the happiness we seek in some sensory experience is the real deal. We're there. 'I've found the happiness and contentment I've always sought.' Or so we think. Or more so, so we imagine.

Through the offices of desire, our imagination takes over. Upon seeing an ad for vacationing in Bora Bora, we imagine running through the surf, cool water splashing our sun-warmed skin, the scent of hibiscus, the taste of a Bahama Mama sucked through a long straw poked into a coconut ... fulfilling, primitive sex on the beach. The mind's imagined sensory experiences and a busy feeling of progress gained through strategizing how to attain them, overshadow our ability to correctly discern what is real and true (that is, overshadow the intellect) and the experiences we identify with (ego, the finest quality of intellect). Such is the nature of a weak mind. The intellect flits about on imagined sensory experiences thinking therein lies lasting happiness and contentment. The ego loses familiarity with who we really are, unbounded inner contentment.

For the weak mind, all powerful desire hijacks refined qualities of intellect and ego, and drags them "out there" to where we think we'll find happiness and contentment in the transient/ever-changing relative field of life. This, despite the fact that we all know full well that true happiness and lasting contentment lie within. Regardless, we get all involved (senses, mind, intellect, ego) in desires, thoughts, strategies and actions to attain the object of our desire, believing it will lead to happiness and lasting contentment. The deep-rooted and steady natures of intellect and ego get caught-up in the ever-changing. All seems right with the world.

However, happiness in the ephemeral world of ever-change doesn't last. In time the acquired object loses its allure. Intellect and ego waver. Failure to find lasting

contentment —say, in Bora Bora — registers an *impression* of dissatisfaction deep within the mind which rises as a *desire* to once again find happiness and contentment in some new and different object of the senses, say, a new pair of running shoes. Desire seeds *action* anew (we buy the running shoes and go for a run) and again in time, dissatisfaction. On it goes, one action after another to achieve the object of our desire, lasting inner contentment never achieved.

This binding influence of action fixes us to a cycle of

impression-desire-action.

Bound to our actions, our attention flows ever outward away from inner contentment, the very goal sought.

Yet, when we selflessly serve other's desires, we break the cycle of *impression-desire-action* on the level of our desire to find happiness and contentment in objects of the senses. Serving other's desire we innocently renounce our own. No *desire* to seek happiness and contentment in material things, no selfish *action* to attain it, no *impression* of dissatisfaction. WhamO: the binding influence of action broken. No desire, no attachment to objects of desire. Content in the present, we live in the present. Serving other's desires is key to practicing Karma Yoga (2.45).

In the following verses Krishna addresses the effortless nature of the practice and contrasts it with counterproductive selfish actions which foster bondage to action.

2.40 *In this practice of Yoga no effort is lost and no obstacle exists. Even little of this Dharma [even a little of this practice of Karma Yoga] delivers from great fear.*

Multitasking is a myth: we can't perform two actions at once. Consequently, as soon as we act to serve the desires of others, we innocently renounce our own desires and actions to find happiness and contentment in objects of the senses, that is, we renounce attachments. Liberated from attachments, we're freed from the '*binding influence of action*' to acquire them. '*No effort is lost*' because '*in this practice of Yoga*' we experience liberation the instant we act to serve other's desires. '*No obstacle exists*'

because we've already broken the binding influence of action. How can an obstacle obstruct our path when we've already reached our destination?

As used here '*Dharma*' means moving forward along the path of evolution to higher levels of spiritual and material wellbeing. By practicing Karma Yoga — taking action to serve other's desires — our dharmic path to wellbeing manifests into the present. '*Dharma*' is the feeling of evolution actually experienced during the practice, not some definition on the printed page, not some topic of idle conversation, not wistful thinking. Karma Yoga, the path of action to spiritual and material wellbeing, is our dharma to take. Dharma is the practice of Karma Yoga.

Fear arises from dualities of success and failure. Attached to attractive qualities found in objects of the senses, imagined experiences of success and failure auger into expectations. Fear raises its ugly head out of uncertainty and the potential for despair. However, living in the present and content in all our actions and outcomes, we transcend ephemeral feelings of loss. '*Even a little of this Dharma* [even a little of this practice of Karma Yoga] *delivers from great fear.*'

The selfsame destinies of dharma and karma continue in the next verse.

2.41 *In this [practice and state of] Yoga the resolute intellect is one-pointed, but many-branched and endlessly diverse are the intellects of the irresolute.*

Charm paves dharma's path. '*In this [practice of] Yoga the resolute intellect is one-pointed*' to establish union of self within eternal and unbounded Self. The practitioner of Karma Yoga experiences the charming feeling of growth towards increased happiness and contentment borne from selflessly serving the desires of others. Unfamiliar with the experience of established union, charm ensures progress by gently resolving intellect and pointing it in the direction of evolution along dharma's path.

'*In this [state of] Yoga*' (established union) the goal has been reached. Content within, intellect steadies. Indifferent to the dualities of life on the one hand, and fully resolved and one-pointed by the sweet wholeness of union of self within eternal Self on the other,

outer and inner live in the present. One's feelings, thoughts and actions naturally support the highest levels of spiritual and material wellbeing for all.

Non-practitioners of Karma Yoga operate without the benefit of having charm point the way and encourage action to serve other's desires. Their minds slip into past and future and get stuck in fantasylands of illusion (*Maya*). Imagination, attractions, aversions, and attachments drag subtle qualities of intellect and ego out onto the anvil of ever-changing reality where they get a sound hammering. Bound to their actions to find happiness and contentment in attachments, non-practitioners ride the turbulence of dualities and emotions. They lose sight of spiritual goals sought. Unresolved in intellect, doubtful and infirm of purpose they hop from one unfulfilling desire and action to the next. '*Many-branched and endlessly diverse are the intellects of the irresolute.*'

Without progress towards spiritual goals, non-practitioners lean on selfish actions to achieve material ones, hoping to achieve eternal contentment through satisfaction gained by material wellbeing alone.

2.42 *The undiscerning, engrossed in the letter of the Veda, declare there is nothing else, and speak flowery words.*

"The Vedas are authentic expositions of the path of evolution. They elucidate, step by step, the gradual process of the integration of life and teach the knowledge by which a man may quickly rise through all levels of evolution and attain final liberation."

— Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (commenting on 2.42).

"*The undiscerning*" practice poor judgement. '*Engrossed in the letter of the Veda*' they see only its literal language but not its spirit. Through Vedic rites and rituals they seek greater material wellbeing as an end to bondage. *Sans* spirit, their quest for more narrows vision. Believing that enduring happiness and contentment lie within attractive qualities found in objects of the senses '*they declare there is nothing else.*'

Problem is, without complementary growth in spiritual wellbeing, material wealth fails to satisfy in the long run. Irresolute and confused about the purpose of the Vedas and how they operate to uplift spiritual wellbeing as well, they seek ever greater material wealth. Never satisfied, they fix themselves to the cycle of impression-desire-action, the binding influence of action.

Ignorance is bliss. Bondage is its own safe space. Attractive qualities found in objects of the senses offer degrees of happiness and satisfaction. Seeing the Vedas as only a means to liberation through attainment of material wealth and power they demonstrate the shallow and meaningless capacity of their understanding by speaking '*flowery words*' to reassure themselves and convince others to join them in folly. Misery loves company.

2.43 *Filled with desires, with heaven as their goal, they proclaim rebirth as the reward for action, and prescribe special Vedic rites for the attainment of enjoyment and power.*

The bliss of ignorance keeps the hamster-wheel spinning. '*Engrossed in the letter of the Veda*' (previous verse) leaves one '*filled with desires*' that are ever-refueled by the impression of dissatisfaction borne of action (in the cycle of impression-desire-action, 2.39).

Fixed on the horizontal plane '*the undiscerning*' (previous verse) see the entire purpose of the Vedas in terms comforts, passions and material wellbeing. To them, heavenly planes are as material as the Earthly one and offer only enhanced luxury and sensual pleasure. Rebirth offers '*enjoyment and power*' at high social positions. *Engrossed in the letter of the Veda*' (previous verse), the undiscerning see only the cycle of life-and-death, and remain oblivious to the spirit of the Vedas and its promise of spiritual evolution and final attainment of liberation.

Such are the powers of attractive qualities found in objects of the senses to overshadow the weak mind. So focused on '*the letter of the Veda*' and seduced by their own '*flowery words*,' they favor selfish actions. They lose sight of the vertical plane and achieving liberation from bondage through selfless actions, the very opposite of their narcissistic quest for gain along the horizontal plane.

2.44 *The resolute state of intellect does not arise (on the vertical plane) in the mind of those deeply attached to enjoyment and power, and whose thoughts are captivated by their own flowery words.*

This verse sums up the previous three. *‘The resolute state of intellect does not arise’* in the weak mind focused on material wellbeing. Attention held by the attractive qualities found in fruits of action, one lives on the horizontal plane, in an unresolved and *‘many-branched’* state of intellect, skipping from one fruit to the next, failing to find lasting contentment in each. Taking temporary pleasure in nothing higher than the material fruit borne of Vedic action, one loses sight of the ultimate goal to achieve steady and resolved intellect, to *‘cast away the binding influence of action’* (2.39), to “quickly rise through all levels of evolution and attain final liberation,” (MMY on the Vedas, 2.42), to live outside rebirth in the eternal nature of the Self.

Attachment engenders attachment. *‘Deeply attached to enjoyment and power’* keeps one bound to the cycle of impression-desire-action, always seeking some greater level of material wellbeing and enjoyment of power over others. If attachment to relative levels of material wellbeing and power is your reality and aspiration —and yet unfulfilling — you’re bound to continually seek attachments of even greater *‘enjoyment and power.’*

Captivated by one’s own *‘flowery words’* speaks to the delusional fallacy of seeking lasting contentment outside one’s Self. Further, seeking liberation on our own level of intellectual understanding we achieve little if any progress along our evolutionary path. Deep down in our heart of hearts we know lasting contentment lies within, that the path we seek has nothing to do with enjoyment and power experienced “out there” and yet, having at most limited experience of liberation and at best fuzzy understanding of how to engender it, we’re lost at sea.

What’s needed is a clear experience of liberation.

2.45 The Veda’s concern is with the three Gunas. Be without the three Gunas, freed from duality, ever firm in purity, independent of possessions, possessed of the Self.

There’s a new kid on the block. Yoga supersedes the Vedas. Understanding and experience supersedes the experience of action alone.

The three Gunas are the primal forces of creation — (1) spur to action, (2) development and (3) dissolution — which uphold all activity, everywhere and at all times. All three

Gunas are necessary for creation to stay its course of evolution. No one Guna exists without the other two, each operating to relative degrees in the phenomenal world of change: creating, developing and dissolving one stage flowing into the next.

Be without the three Gunas: *‘The Veda’s concern is with the three Gunas.’* That is, the Veda’s concern to “arise through all levels of evolution and attain final liberation” (MMY on the Vedas, 2.42) is based on action. To shift Arjuna’s attention from the horizontal plane to the vertical and snap him out of his obsession with right and wrong action, Krishna instructs him to be without action. *‘Be without the three gunas.’*

Krishna’s teaching is a master stroke of simplicity and effectiveness: to resolve the course of action, *‘Be without the three Gunas,’* be without action. Don’t look for a solution to issues of right and wrong action on the level of action — *Unfathomable is the course of action’* (4.16) — else you’ll dissolve into a puddle of irresolution, weakness and inaction, which at this point in the *Gita*, Arjuna personifies.

Though it sounds incongruous — resolving the nature of action and its consequences by nonaction — Krishna’s logic fulfills the practice of Karma Yoga he sets out in 2.39: no three Gunas, no action, no *‘binding influence of action.’* On the level of the Self, nonactive deep within and separated from action on the surface level of the mind (self), the practitioner achieves liberation from action, experiences the eternal and unbounded nature of contentment (Self) in all action, while at the same time distancing from the consequences of action.

Practice Karma Yoga — be without action: Whenever we selflessly serve the desires of others we break *‘the binding influence of action.’* In serving others, their desire sparks our action to achieve their outcome. We operate on their desire and expectation, not ours. In the moment we act to fulfill the other’s desires, we break the cycle of impression-desire-action at the level of our desire to find lasting contentment in the material world. No desire, no action (no three Gunas), no binding influence of action.

This is the practice of Karma Yoga: serve the desires of others and automatically renounce your own. In selflessly serving others, we innocently renounce our own selfish desires to find happiness and contentment in objects of the senses. No selfish desire to

achieve lasting contentment in the material and everchanging world of the three Gunas, no action to attain it (*'Be without the three Gunas'*), no impression of dissatisfaction to spur desire and action anew. Poof! In putting other's desires first, we naturally renounce our own and break the cycle of impression-desire-action (2.39).

'No effort is lost.' In the instant as we act to serve other's desires, our outward flow of attention to seek happiness and contentment in objects of the senses stops dead in its tracks. Liberated from hijacking desire and the self-perpetuating cycle of impression-desire-action, the ever-present and charming field of dharma (2.40) turns attention inward onto the happiness and contentment we seek. Such is the happy and content nature of charm. The path and the goal are one and the same. Liberation is instant.

'No obstacle exists.' Having innocently and completely renounced desire, we need nothing. We're content. There is nothing to obstruct. We're there. We're content within unbounded contentment itself. We live in the eternal present outside time.

Motive and the mechanics of liberation: Dharma is motive, an ever-present field drawing us forward along the path of evolution. We seek happiness and contentment in everything we do. Every action. No exceptions. Everyone — Stalin, Gandhi, your mom, the prison-sentence lifer, you — seeks happiness and contentment in all actions taken. (This may be true for coyotes, turtles and amebae as well. *Quien sabe?*) It is the goal of all action to realize “final liberation” by taking the direction of happiness and contentment, the direction of dharma's flow.

Motive for more happiness and contentment is universally constant, underlies the nature of three Gunas, gives them direction and hence, gives direction to all our feelings, thoughts, and actions. This is dharma: life's ever-present compass heading towards happiness and contentment along the path to higher levels of spiritual and material wellbeing, and final liberation from the bondage of karma.

Dharma is the path to liberation. Have faith in your dharma. *'Be without the three Gunas.'* Throw in the towel. Resistance — that is, selfishness — is futile. Serve other's desires. Innocently renounce your own. Hand your awareness over to dharma. Dharma naturally turns attention inward towards unrealized happiness and contentment; acting

in accord with dharma to serve other's happiness and contentment manifest — because dharma is the charm of happiness and contentment we seek.

'The resolute intellect is one-pointed' (2.41). Having innocently renounced desire and halted the flow of attention out into the disruptive phenomenal world, intellect steadies. Distractions fall away. Singular-motive dharma aims intellect towards liberation. Through intellect's subtlest quality, the ego, we see our ultimate Reality and Truth. Steady, resolute and one-pointed we realize who we really are deep within our mind, outside change, outside time, constant: unbounded and eternal inner contentment, the Self. In realizing our Self in its fulfilling nature of contentment, we feel familiar with all possibilities (Being).

Realization of Self occurs in the same breath we renounce desire. Realization takes no time. As soon as we renounce desire dharma takes over — and the charm of dharma is that happiness and contentment we seek. We live outside the need for change. Content in the present, we live in the present.

Union: Having realized Self, we achieve union of finite outer activity (lower self) within the infinite nature of unbounded inner contentment (higher Self). Contentment just is, non-dimensional, constant, unchanging. Contentment is the End in itself, the goal of all action. By definition, the infinite includes all finite and bound. The finite self unites with the infinite Self as soon as we realize our true nature, inner contentment. In union, individual feeling, thinking and acting (self) coexists in simultaneous union with unbounded contentment (Self).

Desires still engage the mind in actions but fail to drag refined qualities of intellect and ego out into the ever-changing phenomenal world. We still desire on the surface level of the mind; deep within desires no longer occur. This is the experience of union (or Yoga): simultaneously maintaining never-changing inner contentment (Self) while engaged in individual outer activity (self). The assuring, comforting and accepting unbound nature of contentment pervades all actions.

Mother is at home: In union we feel secure from within. The bright light of contentment shines through everything. Petty individuality drops away. We become cosmic in nature. We really do experience the “good day” everyone tells us to have.

- We're '*freed from duality*' of disunion between lower self and higher Self functioning at relative and absolute levels of life. In union, outer and inner live in harmonious union of inner contentment. Tugs of heart and mind cease to whipsaw us into conflicting feelings and actions which wear us down. In the evenness of inner contentment we achieve balance of mind. Success and failure, progress and reversal, ups and downs, hot and cold, easy and hard, forward and backward ... all the dualities of life release their grip. Liberated from fear engendered by loss and gain (2.40), we act in balanced, skillful and easy ways. Freed to act spontaneously, we readily achieve outcomes. We're in the groove.
- Freed from fear of loss we operate from refined levels of inner awareness '*ever firm in purity*' of our selfless intention to serve others, engendering growth in spiritual and material wellbeing. Negativity and wrong actions fall away. In contented sense of Self, right action and positive attitude dominate (2.47).
- Unbounded in contentment, we feel fulfilled. In need of nothing, self-worth exists '*independent of possessions.*' Attachments begone. We cast away the burden of tightly holding onto what we have and the need to possess what we don't. We break free from emotional attachments to outcomes, exercise positive aspects of our personality and enjoy life through actions we take.
- Self dominates. '*Possessed of the Self*' inner contentment pervades all feeling, thinking and action. The bright light of sunshine illuminates all. Our unbounded and fearless inner nature governs. We experience steady intellect and balance of mind (2.48). In the nature of the Self's unshakable contentment, we feel fulfilled (following verse).

It's not called a "practice" for nothing. We experience union each time we serve the desires of others. Depth and duration of experience depend on strength of mind.

Continued practice of Karma Yoga — serving other's desires — strengthens the mind, and enlivens experiences of the higher Self and the harmonious union of lower self with it. In time we become established in union, established in Yoga (2.47, 2.48).

Proof: Hold the door open for someone.

2.46 *To the enlightened Brahman all the Vedas are of no more use than is a small well in a place flooded with water on all sides.*

“My cup runneth over” (23rd Psalm).

This verse carries the previous verse to its conclusion. ‘*Possessed of the Self*’ the ‘*enlightened Brahman*’ feels fulfilled. The experience of quiet inner contentment and feeling of completeness hold sway. The enlightened Brahman feels at home with the world, attuned to the universe and in the groove. The enlightened Brahman witnesses actions flowing smoothly, one into another. In this state of fulfillment, the enlightened Brahman has reached the goal of all action: complete liberation ‘*from the binding influence of action*’ (2.39).

‘*The Veda’s concern is with the three Gunas*’ (2.45). The Veda’s concern is with action to “rise through all levels of evolution and attain final liberation” (MMY on the Vedas, 2.42). Having achieved the goal of all action there’s no need for action the Vedas prescribe. ‘*All the Vedas are of no more use than is a small well in a place flooded with water on all sides.*’

But to achieve the goal of all action (nonaction) we have to act.

2.47 *You have control over action alone, never over its fruits. Live not for the fruits of action nor attach yourself to inaction.*

‘*You have control over action alone.*’ Choose right action and gain ‘*control over*’ efforts to achieve outcomes. Choose wrong action, choose adversity, mire and muddle, and leave outcomes to other fates.

Right and wrong actions: Selfless right actions support growth in spiritual and material wellbeing. Practicing Karma Yoga is right action. When we serve other’s desires we feel bigger, more capable and confident. Attention steadies. Operating in the present we feel guided and in tune with the flow, simultaneously purposeful and yet, indifferent to outcomes. Resolute and motivated. At ease. Positive. We find our place in the world, and feel whole and happy. Uplifted from within.

The uplifting feeling of liberation experienced while selflessly acting to fulfill the desires of others spurs us to action and fuels us forward through thick and thin. Unmindful of outcomes deep within while simultaneously motivated to achieve them, we pour single-minded attention into fulfilling tasks that need doing. Distractions lose sway.

Instinctively aware of what's important; unmindful of what's not. Decisive. Each action is in the moment and builds on the foundation set by the previous. We feel harmony between quiet inner awareness and outer activity. Our path of action to higher levels of wellbeing unfolds in front of us.

On the other hand, selfish wrong actions hamper growth in spiritual and material wellbeing. Hence, wrong actions are sins. By engaging in them, we become a negative force. Wrong actions cause harm to others and ourselves; hinder achieving outcomes; produce stress, strain and damaging influences on others and the environment; diminishes what has been created for the greater good. Wrong actions result from selfish attitudes of avarice, anger, fear, revenge ... and the ever-seductive sin, elitism. All these sins hamper evolution: selfish attitudes point our attention outwards in the direction of sensory experiences and attachments. Consequently, they reinforce bondage to action and distance us from life-supporting right actions, evolution, inner contentment, and union.

The good news is that selfless right actions obviate selfish wrong actions. Mutually exclusive right and wrong actions cannot co-occur. Selfless actions in service to others leave no room for negative emotions, selfish attitudes and the harmful wrong actions they engender. *'You have control over action alone.'* Gain *'control'* over action, evolution and outcomes. Choose right over wrong actions. Serve the desires of others. Therein lies the smooth path forward to spiritual and material wellbeing, the ultimate fruit of action.

Fruits of action: The fruits of our actions (outcomes) exist in the phenomenal world, beyond ego, intellect, mind, and senses. As a consequence, we have no direct control over them, *'never over its fruits.'* In putting attention on fruits we siphon energy away from actions required to achieve them. We fix our attention on the horizontal plane and

lose sight of the vertical and the purpose of action: liberation from bondage. *‘Live not for the fruits of action.’*

‘Nor attach yourself to inaction’ because liberation from bondage requires action. No action to break its binding influence, no evolution, no liberation.

It’s a practice: Through selfless action to serve the desires of others we *‘break’* bondage to action. Through repeated service we *‘cast’* it away.

Serving the desires of others, we break *‘the binding influence of action’* and transcend personal limitations. We feel confident and capable. Dualities, and the anticipation of loss and gain lose their grip. Actions feel natural, purposeful and right. We enjoy performing them. The harmony between outer actions and nonactive inner contentment strengthens union between the two.

Through repeated acts of selflessly serving others, union strengthens. Optimism rules. Possibilities pop out of the woodwork. Actions feel spot on. Outcomes become more easily and effortlessly achieved. Harmony between inner contentment and outer activity deepens union between the two. In the groove, we increasingly identify with inner contentment. In time, union stabilizes. We *‘cast away the binding influence of action’* and become established in union, that is, established in Yoga. How long will it take? Only long enough to understand this chapter.

2.48 Established in Yoga, perform actions having abandoned attachments and having become balanced in success and failure, for balance of mind is called Yoga.

This verse brings the previous three to fruition in the practicalities of daily life.

‘Established in Yoga’ we’ve achieved the goal of all actions and have nothing to gain or lose in performing them. Having *‘cast away the binding influence of action’* we’re content within. Consequently, we’ve *‘abandoned attachments’* to the fruits of outer activity. Equanimity and balance are two sides of the same coin. Out of this equanimity of inner contentment we experience *‘a mind balanced in success and failure’* in outer activities.

Freed from overshadowing '*success and failure*' — and the potential for despair — we're free and open to the flow of life. Surprises hold little influence on our forward movement to get things done. Frictions, delays, difficult personalities ... all the obstructions we encounter in moving the ball downfield fail to knock us off balance. Having cast off the emotional attachments associated with imbalance in loss and gain, we're steady, alert, flexible, and resourceful. We spontaneously respond to situations as they arise. We play heads-up ball and naturally throw ourselves into action.

Balance of mind is manifest union of self within Self. That union is called Yoga. '*For balance of mind is called Yoga.*'

2.49 *Far away from the balanced intellect is action devoid of greatness. Take refuge in the intellect. Pitiful are those who live for the fruits of action.*

Through the faculty of intellect we make thousands of decisions daily. A balanced intellect identifies with unbounded inner contentment of the Self. Based in the Self, all decisions are selfless (by definition) and so, intellect inherently discerns selfless right action from selfish wrong action. (2.47) Call '*balanced intellect*' wisdom (later, 2.51). [By-the-by, balanced intellect and its ability to make wise decisions which support all is the long sought-after goal of a liberal arts education.]

'*Far away from the balanced intellect*' is selfish intellect attached to the ever-changing phenomenal field of existence, riding the rollercoaster of life's dualities. In selfish search for happiness and contentment in objects of the senses, attractions (and aversions) found in those objects overshadow the steady nature of intellect and jerk it around from one promising (or calamitous) outcome to next. Stuck in emotional thinking, we falter. By taking refuge in wavering intellect, the selfish character of our decisions holds favor. Discernment and making correct decisions which benefit all flies out the window. In the willy-nilly world of wavering intellect, we lose foresight and direction. We stumble along at best.

Under the sway of wavering intellect, we perform feeble and ineffective actions '*devoid of [the] greatness*' required to further evolution in spiritual and material wellbeing. We fritter away life, far less effective than we otherwise might be. '*Pitiful are those who live*

for the fruits of action,’ selfish, bound to the ever-changing, out of step with the pull of dharma, pathetic and dismissed, willfully trapped on the rollercoaster of dualities, dizzy with the inevitable ups and downs and twisting turns of fate.

‘*Take refuge in the intellect.*’ Practice Karma Yoga. Serve the desires of others. Be without the three Gunas. Steady the intellect and identify with nonactive Self, contentment, and the source of life and all its potential (Being) (2.45). Naturally perform actions based on a ‘*balanced intellect*’ which identifies with the unbounded nature of Self. Enjoy your inner unbounded strengths. Bring them to fore in outer activity. ‘*Take refuge in the intellect.*’ Go with the flow of dharma. Serve the desires of others. Cast away the consequences of karma (next verse).

2.50 *He whose intellect unites with the Self casts off good and evil [actions/karma] even here. Therefore, devote yourself to Yoga. [The practice of Karma] Yoga is skill in action.*

Be without the three Gunas, be without action, be without karma, Be.

To help illustrate the difference between action and nonaction, Krishna describes the full range of action from good to evil. Good or right actions in accord with dharma support evolution; evil or wrong actions in discord with dharma retard evolution. Through ‘*good*’ actions we prosper. Through ‘*evil*’ actions we suffer. All actions lie between extremes of good and evil, between consequences of prosperity and suffering. Nonactions — actions beyond the consequences of karma — lie outside ‘*good and evil*’ in the field of all possibilities.

‘*He whose intellect unites with the Self.*’ Through the ego, the subtlest quality of intellect, we realize the ultimate Reality and Truth: we are unbounded and nonactive inner contentment. We are Self, outside action, outside time, outside cause and effect. Being in Self, we unite with it, obviously, and the intellect takes on the nonactive nature of Self: eternally quiet, steady, unbounded, nonactive, untouchable. In nonaction we live beyond time and the whole range of action ruled by the three Gunas. More importantly, in nonaction we live beyond the consequences of our actions, beyond karma and

completely *‘cast off good and evil even here.’* We fully achieve the promise set forth in 2.39: *‘Cast away the binding influence of karma.’*

‘Devote yourself to Yoga.’ Devote yourself to the practice of achieving steady and balanced intellect through the practice of Yoga. Devote yourself to uniting intellect with the Self. That’s the name of the game: Yoga. Through the intellect realize the Self. Unite with it. Achieve the state of nonaction deep within you. Let nonaction and all the possibilities of it (Being) flourish in your feelings, thoughts and actions. By serving the desires of others spontaneously renounce your own desires and actions — and the entire range of good and evil actions they foster. Cast away the bondage of karma. *‘Devote yourself to Yoga’* and live beyond the effects of your actions, live beyond karma.

‘Yoga is skill in action.’ In union, lower self unites with higher Self. United with it, active lower self bases itself in non-active higher Self. Beyond dualities and the fear they engender, beyond the consequence of your actions, perform spontaneous, smooth and effective actions, actions that achieve desired outcomes. This is *‘skill in action’*: lower self based in higher Self, action based in nonaction, action freed from fear, action liberated from the bondage of karma, actions based in all possibilities. The practice of Karma Yoga itself is skill in action, the ultimate in manifest wisdom.

2.51 *The wise, their intellect truly united with the Self, having renounced fruits born of action, liberated from the bonds of birth, live eternally in a place void of suffering.*

‘The wise’ operate from the level of the Self, unattached to the phenomenal world and its sphere of influence and change. *‘Their intellect truly united with the Self’* they live beyond the consequences of their actions and naturally make good decisions unencumbered with selfish desire. Desireless actions uphold evolution to higher levels of spiritual and material wellbeing for all (previous two verses).

‘Having renounced the fruits born of action....’ The word “renounced” is past tense. Renunciation is necessary for *‘their intellect [to be] truly united with the Self.’* The canonical view is that renunciation is an overt “practice” of indifference to fruits (or outcomes). By practicing indifference to fruits we renounce desire for them. Seems

logical enough. The practice of Karma Yoga is then the practice of indifference to objects of desire. True enough but not through overt renunciation.

On the other hand.... In my commentary I use renunciation as an “event.” The practice of Karma Yoga is serving other’s desires, an event that innocently renounces one’s own desires.

Before commenting further we need to resolve which type of renunciation Lord Krishna refers to when he says, ‘*Having renounced fruits born of action.*’ Practice of event? It’s a big deal.

Renunciation as a practice:

A universal belief holds that renunciation is the practice of maintaining an attitude of indifference to outcomes (likewise *dispassion*, *disinterest* and *neutral*). By downplaying one’s interest in outcomes, one renounces desire for them and achieves a desireless state of mind — or so goes the notion of the canonical practice of Karma Yoga.

Truth be told, there is no such thing as a desireless state of mind, unless of course, you’re dead. Desire for more is ever present — at least on the surface level of the mind (self). Desire for more is a good thing; desiring more happiness and contentment points us along our path of dharma to higher levels of wellbeing. Desire for more is true North. So, right out of the starting blocks renunciation as a practice runs into a philosophical problem. It runs into practical problems as well.

Practitioners of indifference achieve the opposite of their intended effect. Rather than liberate themselves from the binding influence of action, renunciation as a practice reinforces it. Indifference itself becomes the desired outcome. Indeed, to the serious practitioner, indifference becomes their *raison d’etre*. But, one can’t desire indifference and simultaneously remain desireless. In fact, the more desirous and determined to achieve indifference, the stronger one epoxies desire into the cycle of impression-desire-action, and reinforces bondage — and ignorance.

It gets worse. In practicing indifference one takes their eye off the ball. Concentrating on indifference to outcomes, rather than on actions to achieve them, one becomes unfocused and inattentive. Drawing on a finite store of mental energy to remain

indifferent and constantly struggling to overcome the natural desire for happiness and contentment (that is, pull of dharma) wears us down and dulls the mind. Practitioners of indifference become indolent, easily distracted and unproductive — unfortunately, all signs taken as demonstrating the effectiveness of practicing indifference. That is, if you're “spaced out” and detached from reality you've achieved the goal of indifference, or at least you're well on your way.

In focusing on indifference to outcomes, practitioners hit rock bottom. Indifferent actions are selfish actions and lie close to the evil end on the metric of *‘good and evil actions.’* Selfish thinking — ‘Me. Me. Me. It's all about me conjuring a mood of indifference’ — fosters actions which give rise to anger, fear, jealousy, prejudice, and other negative emotions. Negative emotions retard flexibility and hamper evolution. Typically practitioners of indifference — ineffective in worldly life of responsibilities, strained by holding the natural desire for happiness at bay and absorbed in their self — are ticking time-bombs. Such is the nature of being stoned on ignorance. Moods of indifference are not Self-sustaining. Worse, practicing indifference to outcomes is a negative force in the world.

Renunciation as an event:

Whenever we serve the desire of others (the event), we naturally break the cycle of impression-desire-action at the level of our desire to find happiness and contentment in material things. In a snap of the fingers we innocently renounce our own desire to find contentment in *‘fruits born of action.’* Having renounced all desire, the intellect unites with the self (2.50). We experience desires on the surface level of the mind. Deep within on the level of contented and unbounded Self, desires no longer occur.

Fish or cut bait?

Krishna establishes criteria for evaluating renunciation in 2.39 and 2.40. He couldn't be clearer: renunciation must *‘cast away the binding influence of action’* while *‘no effort is lost and no obstacle exists.’* Renunciation as a practice reinforces the binding influence of action and in addition, requires great effort to overcome the mind's natural tendency to follow dharma — a huge obstacle.

Yet.... We don't need to practice indifference. Every time we serve other's desires (the event) we renounce our own. What could be more readily experienced and logical! The mind naturally goes with the flow of dharma towards inner contentment, union and wisdom. *'No effort is lost and no obstacle exists'* when we serve the desires of others.

I'm placing my bet on renunciation as an event. Onward....

'Liberated from the bonds of birth....' Birth continues until the goal of liberation from karma has been achieved. This is the purpose of life and action. Once the goal of all actions and life has been achieved, we are liberated from the bonds of karma. There is no need to be reborn and live another life. We live in a place beyond selfish attachments and the evil actions selfishness fosters, *'liberated from the bonds of birth, live eternally in a place void of suffering.'* That is, live void of the evil feelings, thoughts and actions, and the negativity and suffering they spawn. Such are the rewards of being wise.

2.52 When your intellect has crossed the mire of delusion, then you will gain indifference to what has been heard and what is to be heard.

There is no time like the present.

By renouncing desire (previous verse) we cast away past and future, and surrender to the present. When the intellect steadies through acts of selflessly serving the desires of others, realizes the unbounded nature of the Self and unites with it, the *'intellect has crossed the mire of delusion'* with the attractive qualities found in objects of the senses that keep us bound to the ever-changing phenomenal world. Stuck in the past. Stuck in the future. This is the ultimate self-delusion: we all know that what we seek lies within, yet we constantly look for it "out there" in some future (or past) imagined event. *Maya* is in our neuron-firing heads.

Having *'cast away the binding influence of action,'* (2.39) the timeless light of Self illuminates all. The slogfest is over. Understanding and experience become one. The babble stops. The *'intellect truly united with the Self'* (previous verse), we live in the present, content within, indifferent to the past and future, totally indifferent *'to what*

has been heard and what is to be heard' on gaining liberation from the binding influence of action (see also 2.46).

Be here now. (Sorry. I couldn't resist.) Live in the eternal present, outside the tick-tock of time. Hold the door open for someone, help your mom with the dishes, pitch in with your spouse ... or perform some other simple act of selfless service. Step into the present and onto the path. *'No effort is lost and no obstacle exists.'*

Summary 2.39 – 2.52:

All feelings, thoughts and actions lead to the Self. There is no escape. It is our dharma to unite lower self with higher Self. The allure of fulfillment draws us like a magnet. When we serve someone else's desire it is that charming tug towards fulfillment that spurs us to action and overshadows our own desire to find happiness and contentment in attractive qualities found in objects of the senses. We experience union and want more of it.

In the beginning the feeling of union is not enough to sustain itself. The mind is too weak to resist furthering contentment in the material world and we lose the feeling. Repeated experience of union through the practice of Karma Yoga reinforces the feeling of it. In time we come to identify with it and the value of contentment begins to be felt in all we do. Infused with contentment life flows along. The ups and downs are less consequential. Our actions feel harmonious. We're in the groove. Lower self lives in higher Self and we feel complete.

2.53 When your intellect, bewildered by Vedic texts, shall stand unshaken, steadfast in the Self, [steady] then you will attain to Yoga.

“Vedic wisdom comprises various expressions of Reality, as seen from different points of view and taught by different schools of thought. These manifold theories are meant to satisfy the different levels of human understanding, the purpose of the Vedas being to enlighten people of all types.” — Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (commentary on this verse)

The intellect discerns what is real and true. The broad scope of Vedic texts, plus different points of view and schools of thought, bewilder irresolute intellects. The irresolute skip from one theory to the next, never reaching sufficient depth to see reality and truth in any. *‘When your intellect, bewildered by Vedic texts....’*

Your intellect *‘shall stand unshaken, steadfast in the Self’* when its subtlest quality, the ego, sees the ultimate reality and truth: I am unbounded contentment, the Self. Content, fulfilled and living in the present we feel comfortable with all that has gone before. Everything in the past — snowball Earth, Precambrian trilobites, glaciations, your uncle’s gout, the War of Roses, invention of the spoon, and manifold Vedic texts — has brought us to this moment. Content in the present we feel comfortable with all that is true. Like everything else, Vedic texts feel like a snugly stockinged foot slipping into a comfortable old shoe.

Content and comfortable with all, we have achieved the intent of Vedic texts. Liberated from *‘the binding influence of action’* (2.39) in need of nothing, established in union of self within Self (2.45), balanced in mind (2.48) and skilled in action (2.50). *‘Then [and only then] you shall attain to Yoga.’*

Arjuna wants to know how steady intellect manifests in outward appearance.

2.54 Arjuna asks: What are the signs of a man whose intellect is steady, who is absorbed in the Self, O Keshava? How does the man of steady intellect speak, how does he sit, how does he walk?

Arjuna has absorbed Krishna’s teaching and come a long way. When Arjuna last spoke (2.09), he was sinking into a pit of despair and confusion about right and wrong action fostered by opposing dictates of heart and mind. Only after having learned that 1) intellect is the subtlest expression of the relative and 2) subtler still is the unbounded nature of Self could Arjuna ask this question: *‘What are the signs of a man whose intellect is steady, who is absorbed in the Self?’*

Keshava is one with long hair, which symbolizes skill in action and courage, based on a solid foundation of inner strength and wisdom — all qualities Arjuna presently lacks and wants. In addressing Krishna as *‘Keshava,’* Arjuna recognizes Him as all-knowing. Also, Arjuna wants Krishna to understand he’s paying close attention and wants a useful

answer that will allow him to move beyond his current level of understanding and experience — and up his game.

Krishna's outer appearance helps fuel Arjuna's curiosity and phrase his question about how the subtlest qualities deep within the mind manifest in outer appearances. If Krishna's appearance reflects his inner status, then how does '*steady intellect*' affect the outer appearance of a liberated man? How would he, Arjuna, recognize such a man? What would he see of himself when his '*intellect is steady*'?

'How does the man of steady intellect speak, how does he sit, how does he walk?'

Arjuna asks for specifics in terms of '*steady intellect*,' not '*absorbed in the Self*.' Arjuna clearly recognizes the difference between the two and is concerned more with the effect of steady intellect on action than the absolute nature of Self. He knows that Self just *is*. He wants answers in terms of an active man, a warrior, and involved in the dualities of life.

To get the most out of his time, and respectfully not waste Krishna's, Arjuna triangulates what can be learned from outer appearance: expression, inaction, action.

- 'How does he *'speak*'? Is steady intellect reflected in measured thought and expression? Does steadiness have authority over how and what a man speaks?
- How does he *'sit*'? When disengaged, do countenance and mannerisms reflect steady intellect? What are the signs of latent potential in a man at ease?
- How does he *'walk*'? How does he carry himself? Does he act spontaneously? How is inner contentment expressed in the outer demeanor of an active man?

Arjuna asks because he doesn't know. He wants to make sure he's headed in the right direction by looking at outer appearances for signs of inner wellbeing — and possibly a path to follow through imitation.

Krishna answers Arjuna's questions in terms of '*established intellect*,' not steady intellect, in 2.64. Steady intellect is transient. Only when steady intellect evolves to established intellect, an intellect established in the Self and absorbed in all its aspects, do values of liberation exhibit themselves in outer appearance.

2.55 Krishna responds: *When a man has thrown off all desires, when he is content in the Self through the Self alone, then he is said to be of steady intellect.*

‘*When a man has thrown off all desires....*’ When we serve the desires of others, we innocently renounce our own and so to speak, throw them off. No desires, we break the cycle of impression-desire-action at the level of our desire to find happiness and contentment in objects of the senses. Through repeatedly serving the desires of others, we completely cast them away. For details on ‘breaking’ and ‘casting away’ see verses 2.45 and 2.47.

‘*When he is content in the Self through the Self alone....*’ No desires, needing nothing and without expectations, we remain peaceful, calm and content deep within the mind. Desires still occur on the surface level of the mind but deep within, desires no longer occur. Directed by dharma (2.40), ego — the subtlest quality of intellect — discerns our ultimate reality and truth and primarily identifies with it: lasting inner contentment. Identifying with the equilibrium Self-sustaining contentment of Self, intellect steadies. ‘*Then he is said to be of steady intellect.*’

2.56 *He whose mind is unshaken in the midst of sorrows, who amongst pleasure is free of longing, from whom attachment fear and anger have departed, he is said to be a sage of steady intellect.*

Life has ups and downs. Loss is an integral part of living in an ever-changing reality full of surprises, of living in a reality where the course of action-reaction is complicated and unpredictable beyond our comprehension. Loss and sorrow happen for reasons outside our ken and there is no point in fanning their flames and prolonging them by trying to comprehend their source and reason for being.

For those of steady intellect, the surface level of the mind responds to loss accordingly with empathy, compassion and caring actions. But deep within intellect’s identity with Self’s sustaining contentment of Self (previous verse) we remain ‘*unshaken in the midst of sorrows.*’ Remaining unshaken is not a matter of understanding the reason for sorrow. Further, rising above sorrow has nothing to do with knowing its source and nature. Rather, rising above is a matter of being content deep within where intellect

identifies with lasting contentment. In contentment sorrows do not exist and in this way, we detach from them deep within. Not that we are cold-hearted. Rather, we indeed feel sorrow on the surface level of the mind and to that degree of involvement, respond fittingly. But not to the degree of forming deep impressions which keep us bound to the cycle of impression-desire-action and wallowing in sorrow, fear, anger, and other negative emotions.

It is this strength of ever-present contentment of higher Self to ground lower self from being burned by lightning strikes of emotion. Content, we fail to establish attachments to ‘*sorrow*,’ ‘*fear and anger*,’ despair and alike, and being carried away by them. Similarly, the equilibrium of all-pervasive inner contentment leaves little room for being overwhelmed by ‘*pleasure*,’ joy and other positive emotions; we’re ‘*free of longing*’ for them. We certainly experience pleasure but feel no need to perpetuate it. Established in contentment we get on with life knowing full well through experience and understanding that positive feelings of happiness and joy come from within only (see *happiness* in 2.66).

A ‘*sage of steady intellect*’ is someone worth listening to. Through intellectual understanding and direct experience a sage is someone knowledgeable of Absolute and relative, ever-changing fields of life. Established in this knowledge, emotions fail to carry away a sage of steady intellect.

2.57 He who has no undue fondness for anything, who neither exalts nor recoils on gaining what is good or bad, his intellect is established.

Here, Krishna transitions from steady intellect to established intellect and the power it has over conscious awareness. Steady intellect is transient and at least in the beginning, is experienced when serving other’s desires, when we’ve innocently renounced our own desires for theirs. Established, through the office of ego, the intellect identifies primarily with the Self. Self is Absolute and lies outside the field of activity. Established in it, intellect takes on the qualities of the Absolute which infuse into mind, desires and actions. Established in the Absolute one engages in action but one’s outer experiences fail to make deep impressions on a mind infused with contentment. One remains

uninvolved, living in quiet inner awareness of outer experiences. This is Cosmic Consciousness; one is cosmically (everywhere and at all times) consciously aware. Through establishment of intellect with the Absolute and unmoving Self, conscious awareness of the mind maintains itself during waking, sleeping and dreaming.

Established in it, intellect sustains the inner freedom of Self while engaged in outer activity. We remain uninvolved with activity while simultaneously dealing with emotions and actions efficiently and effectively. In a way, it's same old same old. The intellect functions as always, discerning what is real and true and guiding life through the nature of the mind. But now this very intellect is grounded in the unbounded nature of Self and one experiences Self as separate from activity. Activities occur "out there" while we remain immersed in quiet contentment deep within the intellect established in Self.

'He has no undue fondness for anything' because intellect and mind are established in the all-pervading fullness of contented Self at all times. Fulfilled, he needs and desires nothing more to achieve happiness and contentment. Involved and at the same time uninvolved, fullness of Self infuses heart and mind, and one reacts appropriately on the level of feelings. It's just that conscious awareness remains uninvolved, separate from activity and witnessing (as it were) life unfold. Living in the evenness of unbounded contentment of Self he *'neither exalts nor recoils on gaining what is good or bad.'*

Involved and uninvolved? Witnessing? The concept of separation from activity is so new and different, Krishna offers a metaphor.

2.58 And when such a man withdraws his senses from their objects, as a tortoise draws in his limbs from all sides, his intellect is established.

From the commentary on 2.39: "We become bound (attached) to our actions when desire contacts the senses with attractive qualities found in objects of sensory experience."

Content in its Self, the higher Self needs nothing; Self is Self-sufficient and eternally desireless. Because established intellect is absorbed in the Self — and that's how it

becomes established in the first place through the ego identifying with it — no desires occur deep within the mind. Content, no desire, no attraction and aversion of the senses with objects of sensory experience. *‘A man withdraws his senses from their objects, as a tortoise draws in his limbs from all sides.’*

2.59 Objects of the senses turn away from him who does not feed upon them, but the taste for them persist. On seeing the Supreme Truth even this taste ceases.

Through the agency of desire, it's the attractive qualities found in objects of sensory experience that contacts senses with them (previous verse, 2.39). Once desire has been severely attenuated deep within the mind, it's as though the objects of the senses lose their attraction. Appeal gone, seemingly *‘Objects of the senses turn away from him who does not feed upon them.’*

It's through attachment we *‘feed upon’* objects of the senses. Their appealing quality never lasts for long. More so, taste always fails to deliver on its promise of satisfaction. Never fully satisfied, we're caught in the cycle of impression-desire-action (2.39) and feed and feed and feed upon objects of the senses bound to our actions.

Through the strong habit of attachment *‘the taste for them persists.’* Pleasurable taste triggers memory which encourages an irresistible hunger deep within. But when the intellect becomes absorbed in the Self, we realize the *‘Supreme Truth’* about our real nature. We identify with the unbounded inner contentment of Self and cease to look for satisfaction outside Self. *‘Even this taste [for objects of the senses] ceases’* in Cosmic Consciousness.

2.60 The turbulent senses forcibly carry away the mind of even a discerning man who endeavors to resist them.

The senses attached to an object's attractive (or aversive) qualities powerfully influence the mind's ability to make decisions. In the absence of a mind's decision-making ability being grounded in the contentment of established intellect, the *‘turbulent senses forcibly carry away the mind’* from its duties. Attraction overpower logic, memory,

perception, feeling, intuition ... all the mind's qualities used by the intellect to discern. This is especially true for '*the man who endeavors to resist*' the turbulent senses, his endeavors fixing his attachment to very senses he wishes to resist.

We draw three lessons from this verse: 1) Resisting turbulent senses is futile. 2) In fact, the very need to endeavor resisting turbulent senses is a sure sign of a wavering and irresolute intellect, susceptible to those very turbulent senses one endeavors to resist. Resisting fixes attachment to the senses and makes matters worse. 3) Capture the fort. Deny turbulent senses the opportunity to carry away the mind. Rise to the status of an intellect established in content and desireless Self and discern with the senses disengaged from the turbulent nature of reality.

2.61 *Having brought them all [turbulent senses] under control, let him sit united, looking to Me as Supreme, for his intellect is established whose senses are subdued.*

Absorbed in the content and fulfilling nature of Self, established intellect functions in a desireless state. No desire, no attachment to objects of the senses (2.39). The senses having turned away from their objects (2.59) are brought under control by the effect established intellect on the mind: '*Having brought them all under control*' by an intellect established in the desireless Self and absorbed in its very nature (see first paragraph, 2.57).

Established intellect united with the Self, the practitioner of Karma Yoga achieves Cosmic Consciousness. Though having reached this goal of all actions, the path forward doesn't stop. From this vantage point, one's vision clears. One tastes God Consciousness and is drawn forward along the path of dharma.

In God Consciousness one lives separate from activity, as in Cosmic Consciousness, but in addition, one realizes oneself as the sole beneficiary of activity. All actions — everything, everywhere, current, past — are seen in terms of oneself. Everything happens for a reason and as it turns out, that reason is you. [More on this in chapters 3 and 4.] Even a taste of the Supreme sets the seeker on the way forward. '*Let him sit united, looking to Me as Supreme, for his intellect is established....*' This is the greatest

reward for having achieved established intellect (or Cosmic Consciousness): the dawning of something even greater still.

Established in the Self, intellect takes on the nature of the Self: Self-sustaining, needing nothing (see first paragraph, 2.57). In this desireless state, where the senses no longer connect with their objects and indeed, having even turned away from those objects (2.59), the '*senses are subdued*' from the turbulent state induced through their connection with ever-changing and turbulent reality (previous verse).

2.62 Pondering on objects of the senses, a man develops attachment for them. From attachment springs up desire and desire gives rise to anger.

Krishna contrasts a man of established intellect looking towards the '*Supreme*' with a man of wavering intellect '*pondering on objects of the senses,*' as if '*objects*' were the end-all/be-all to lasting happiness and contentment. One who ponders '*on objects of the senses*' has become attached to their attractive qualities. '*From attachment springs up desire*' to acquire the object through action. Acquired, the object leaves an impression of dissatisfaction deep within the mind from not having delivered on its alluring promise to bring lasting happiness and contentment.

'*Pondering on objects of the senses*' is endless and fruitless and perpetuates the cycle of impression-desire-action, the binding influence of action. As it were, one is tied up, bound to dissatisfaction, yet still endlessly seeking satisfaction through the cycle of dissatisfaction. Deep disappointment in the futility of pondering and in one's weakness and inability to achieve fulfillment through attachment, unfulfilled desires longed-for frustrate the mind and '*gives rise to anger.*'

Krishna lays out the consequences of anger in the following verse.

2.63 From anger arises delusion; from delusion unsteadiness of memory; from unsteadiness of memory destruction of intellect; through destruction of intellect he perishes.

Anger is the ultimate attachment. It feeds on itself. Anger goes away when it has destructed itself by destroying intellect. Except when, see An Aside following.

‘From anger arises delusion.’ Anger promotes its own fact-less narrative which plays out in our mind. We see our world through the lens of a reality we create and distort to achieve an outcome through negative emotions. Our fantasy is so wonderfully intoxicating and overpowering, we disengage from harmonious rhythms of life and a steady course forward.

‘From delusion unsteadiness of memory.’ In our anger, we imagine events unfold independent of accurate memory and the implausible outcomes they pose, leaving decision-making intellect stranded and operating without factual basis.

‘Through destruction of intellect’ imagination overrides reality. Based on fanciful input, intellect falters and disfunctions. We’re left adrift. Without means to correct course and steer through life’s reefs, shallows and stormy seas we flounder on the hard rocks of reality, on the hard rocks of an ignorance we embrace. Disaster ahead. *‘He perishes.’* Perhaps not literally but with intellect destroyed, figuratively.

[An Aside: How to cool the hot jets of anger? Serve the desires of others.

Attachments exists, often in our pasts and they come looming out of the dark recesses of our mind when triggered. I’ve seen the Holiest of men flare up in anger. How can that be? The thing is, we “primarily” identify with the Self. Clinging past attachments are there and called “the remains of ignorance” or Lesha Avidya. The remains of ignorance are real as rain; anger based on past attachments sidetracks even best intentions. It happens. But sidetracked is okay.

Verses 2.62 and 2.63 alert us to conditions under which anger raises its ugly head, to anger’s destructive nature and to the need to stop throwing fuel on the fire. The key to dousing anger is to immediately serve the desires of others — in any way we can lay our minds or hands on. Even thinking about serving others helps. But action is better. Being specific in our thoughts and actions we supplant ephemeral and unpleasant feelings, which fuel anger, with steady pleasant ones. Innocently renouncing burning desire for attachment sets our attention back on path and we feel a strong measure of inner contentment in our renewed progress. Contentment cools the hot jets of anger.]

2.64 *But he who is self-disciplined, who moves among the objects of the senses with senses freed from attraction and aversion and under his own control, he attains to grace.*

‘*But he who is self-disciplined...*’ Intellect established in the desireless Self disengages senses from the turbulent vicissitudes of reality (2.60). More so, the senses turn away from their objects and are brought under the control of contented Self through the influence of established intellect absorbed in it (2.61). In this way an intellect established in the nature of higher Self naturally disciplines functions of lower self united within Self — that is, established intellect governs mind and senses — to act along a steady course of contentment unaffected by attractions and aversions. He ‘*moves among the objects of the senses with senses freed from attraction and aversion and under his own control.*’

Finally an answer to Arjuna’s question posed in 2.54: ‘*How does the man of steady intellect speak, how does he sit, how does he walk?*’ Krishna answers in terms of established intellect. Freed from attractions and aversions, the intellect, mind and senses reflect the wholeness of contented Self. Established in Self, one moves among objects of senses endowed with dignity, divine guidance, confidence, and comfort in all possibilities. ‘*He attains to grace.*’

Selflessly serving the desires of others is the ultimate self-discipline, addresses this verse, and naturally and effortlessly leads to established intellect and to ‘grace’ in all actions, mental and physical.

2.65 *In grace is born an end to all his sorrows. Indeed the intellect of a man of exalted consciousness soon becomes firmly established.*

This verse reveals a steppingstone to a higher level of consciousness than Cosmic.

In 2.56 the man of steady intellect’s ‘*mind is unshaken in the midst of sorrows.*’ In this verse on established intellect, ‘*In grace is born an end to all his sorrows.*’ This verse ups

the ante on 2.56 to put an *'end to all his sorrows'* rather than remaining *'unshaken in the midst of sorrows.'*

Grace is a step above harmony between inner contentment and outer activity that drives *'casting away the binding influence of action'* described in 2.47 (It's a practice). Grace acts in the same way as harmony to further evolution, but to a higher level of consciousness: *'In grace is born....'* Charming grace supersedes harmony for moving up the evolutionary ladder. When consciousness awareness remains uninvolved (2.58), one sees their own inner graceful nature in action and identify with it. Through witnessing and remaining uninvolved with one's graceful actions, the depth of one's true nature being in step with Nature stabilizes and evolves — again and as always through the intellect and ego. We see ourselves in graceful action and increasingly identify with it.

Indeed the intellect of a man of exalted consciousness soon becomes firmly established. The step to established intellect (or Cosmic Consciousness) is an important one; once gained, exalted God Consciousness is soon realized. In witnessing the grace of their actions being in step with Nature, one becomes filled with joy and gratitude to God. [Not that God seeks gratitude. Gratitude is your reward: Joy.] There's no room for sorrow. Sorrow gets squeezed out. Thus in the established intellect of Cosmic Consciousness, the gateway to exalted God Consciousness, is *'born'* an end to all his sorrows. More on the power of grace to uplift one to God Consciousness in subsequent chapters.

2.66 He who is not established has no intellect, nor has he any steady thought. The man without steady thought has no lasting contentment, for without lasting contentment how can there be happiness?

An established intellect sees its true nature in the Self and is absorbed in it. All attributes of Self characterize intellect. This is the ultimate Truth sought by truth-seeking intellect; this is the ultimate discernment; this is the end game, the Super Bowl in the season of Cosmic Consciousness. Established intellect realizes all as aspects of Self. For all practical purposes, intellect manifests unbounded Self.

'He who is not established has no intellect' because powers of discernment will always be shadowed by disappointment and anger (even the slightest irritation), resulting from

weakness and inability to achieve happiness and contentment in objects of the senses (2.62, 2.63). The mind and senses attached to ever-changing reality get involved and muck up the rhythm and order of things that naturally flow from the Self through established intellect. Establishment of intellect with Self and Self's all-knowing aspect and comfort with all possibilities is lost. Powers of discernment (2.60) fly out the window, so to speak. For one who '*has no intellect*,' no powers of discernment, the chances of a thought achieving a fulfilling outcome that supports evolution is up in the air, a roll of the dice and unsteady in its outcome. '*Nor has he any steady thought*' to deliver the goods that is lasting contentment.

Happiness is a positive time so strong it blows away the passage of time and we see the reason for our inner contentment: the fabric of the universe, Joy. Happiness exists; Contentment exists; Joy exists. In experiencing happiness they come as a package and cannot be unpacked. Experience and Reality. You can't have one without the other. '*For without lasting contentment how can there be happiness?*'

The following verse further explains the nature of '*no intellect*.'

2.67 *When a man is governed by any of the wandering senses, his intellect is carried away by them as a ship by wind on water.*

A man who '*is governed by any of the wandering senses*' is in the same boat as '*He who is not established has no intellect*' in the previous verse. He has no intellect, no discernment, no steady thought, no contentment, no happiness — no sense of Self. As the senses wander about looking for happiness in everything, so does the mind under their influence. *Sans* established intellect in the Self, the mind acts as intellect's surrogate. A *faux* intellect, if you will. The senses are in complete control of the mind (2.60); no intellect needed in searching for lasting happiness and contentment, or so the mind thinks. The potential for intellect is always there, just unmanifest and dormant, the mind being the pretender to the throne in the absence of intellect established in the Self.

The *faux* intellect of the mind '*is carried away by them* [the wandering senses] *as a ship by wind on water*.' Such a beautiful metaphor for mind's failing attempts at playing the role of established intellect: wispy, lighter than air and at its most evident, merely a

metaphoric construct of imagination — and certainly nothing capable of discernment. No intellect, no discernment, plain and simple. The intellect only manifests with aspects of Self, when it identifies with Self. That is why the unrealized man is referred to as ignorant. He has ‘*no intellect.*’ He has brains and a mind, if you will, but no intellect. He never attains to witnessing his fulfilling graceful actions.

The take-home: Rather than selfishly let the senses govern mind, naturally take control, selflessly serve the desires of others, strengthen the mind and establish the connection of intellect with Self.

2.68 Therefore he whose senses are all withdrawn from their objects, his intellect is established.

This verse deepens the lessons of 2.58 and 2.59, ‘*as a tortoise draws in his limbs.*’ There the focus was on established intellect. Here the focus is on the end game of happiness, where ‘*Therefore*’ in this verse takes us back to the consequences of 2.66: ‘*how can there be happiness?*’

Happiness is a natural result of contentment through established intellect. When the ‘*senses are all withdrawn from their objects,*’ we naturally find happiness from within through contented Self (2.66). However, when we unnaturally desire happiness through the senses, everchanging reality takes over the senses and mind and things go awry: loss of steady thought, contentment and happiness, the whole shebang.

With this understanding we can cast the negative connotation of the previous verse into the positive and lay to rest Krishna’s discourse on established intellect. ‘*When a man is [no longer] governed by any of the wandering senses, his intellect is [no longer] carried away by [desire] as a ship by the wind on water*’ (previous verse). We’ve sailed into the homeport of ‘*established intellect*’ and enjoy the riches it protects: steady thought, contentment, discernment, and happiness.

Having established the importance of established intellect, the following four verses turn to what a realized man, in fact, realizes.

2.69 That which is night for all beings, therein the self-controlled is awake. That wherein beings are awake is night for the sage who sees.

For ‘*self-controlled*’ see verse 2.64

The realized man (previous verse) and the unrealized man (2.66, 2.67) have different experiences of wakefulness. The realized man is eternally awake in the light of the Self, open to contentment, happiness, all possibilities, living separately from activity, and delightfully witnessing life unfold through one’s graceful actions. The unrealized man is awake to attachments, binding influence of action, weakness, unsteady thought, and anger.

The ‘*self-controlled*’ realized man acts out of the contented nature of the Self through the intellect established in it (2.60). The light of contentment shines through all activities, whether waking, sleeping or dreaming (2.57). ‘*That which is night for all beings, therein the self-controlled is awake.*’ When other (unrealized) beings sleep ‘*in the night*’ the realized man is awake deep within, witnessing sleeping and dreaming.

On the other hand, the unrealized man is awake in ephemeral satisfaction of objects, a state of wakefulness the sage of established intellect merely sees as the darkness of ignorance. Grace is absent from his life. ‘*That wherein beings are awake is night for the sage who sees.*’ Relative to the bright light of the Self, the wakefulness of unrealized beings is pitch black as night, the darkness of ignorance, so to speak.

2.70 He whom all desires enter as waters enter the ever-full and unmoved sea attains peace, and not he who cherishes desire.

All roads lead to the Self. The purpose of any and all desires is to achieve fulfilling contentment and happiness. All desires aim towards this goal, towards the ‘*ever-full and unmoved sea*’ of eternal contentment, the Self.

For one established in contentment of the Self, all desires have been fulfilled. Desire for action still flows towards the ever-full sea of contentment because fulfilling desires is a happy, joyful experience and in addition leads to God Consciousness. But the desire and action its seeds are achieved — in fact have already been achieved — without being held in the strong grip of importance and necessity. One naturally takes it easy: contentment does not depend on any particular desire being fulfilled. One is already content. ‘*He*

whom all desires enter as waters enter the ever-full and unmoved sea attains peace’ of mind.

For the unrealized man *‘who cherishes desire,’* each desire is important and carries the heavy weight of necessity. Contentment depends on this desire being successfully carried out, or so the unrealized man believes. It’s as if he thinks, *‘If I achieve this desire, I’ll be happy, content and evermore fulfilled.’* The pressure is on, really on: happiness and contentment ride on this very desire. For *‘he who cherishes desire,’* fear of failure attaches him to the binding influence of action and he lives in the dark night of ignorance (2.40, previous verse) — not a place well known for *‘peace’* of mind.

Krishna personalizes the concept of peace in the next verse.

2.71 *When a man acts without longing, having relinquished all desire, free from the sense of ‘I and’ mine,’ he attains to peace.*

All desires and actions aim towards contentment (previous verse). In this way *‘a man* [of established intellect] *acts without longing’* because his actions achieve contentment (he’s already content, 2.65) and so, his actions fail to leave impressions of dissatisfaction deep within the mind. The cycle of impression-desire-action kept spinning by deep impression of dissatisfaction ceases. No impression, no desire. Longing is just a strong and persistent desire. No impression, *‘a man acts without longing.’*

Because Self is experienced as separate from activity (2.57), there is no sense of *‘I and mine.’* One identifies with unbounded and eternal Self. He who identifies with the Self (*‘the ever-full and unmoved sea’* of the previous verse) *‘attains to peace’* of the fullness of inner contentment of Self.

The concept of peace of mind is raised to the level of Cosmic Consciousness in the following and final verse.

2.72 *This [peace] is the state of Brahman [Cosmic Consciousness]. Having attained it, a man is not deluded. Established in that, even at the last moment, he attains eternal freedom in divine consciousness.*

‘This [peace] is the state of Brahman’ and there is only one way to live in peace. Live in the present. *‘Delusions’* are a matter of past and future thinking. One who lives in the

present is not deluded by a mind casting backward and forward searching for contentment on partial information overshadowed by sensory experience. Living in the present their happiness only comes from within. They live in the '*eternal freedom*' of now which is ever-present and outside the passage of time. The '*last moment*' is but a tick of the clock. Eternal freedom is forever. Gain that and leave the ticks and tocks behind.

Gaining this '*state of Brahman*' is straightforward and easily accomplished. Take the householder's path. Instinctively serve the desires of those you love and honor (chapter 3, The Yoga of Action). Acting to fulfill other's desires, innocently renounce your own. Naturally let go. No desires, no attachments, content with the present, live in the present. Living in the present in the state of Cosmic Consciousness, God Consciousness (that is, '*divine consciousness*') dawns.

This ends the chapter 2 on the intellectual understanding of yoga.

¹ I stand on the shoulders of a giant. I use *Maharishi Mahesh Yogi on the Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation and Commentary* as my primary reference. Maharishi's emphasis on turning the mind within to the field of least activity through the practice of Transcendental Meditation and my emphasis on the Yoga of action — the practice of Karma Yoga — lead me to slightly alter his translation and differ substantially in commentary. TM prepares the mind for action to achieve the highest levels of spiritual and material wellbeing (pulling the arrow back on the bowstring). The practice of Karma Yoga is that action (the arrow flying forward). The practice of Karma Yoga brings to fruition any practice which quiets the mind and prepares the practitioner for action.