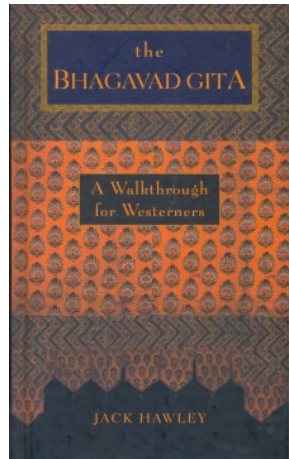


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Hug This Old Book

by Jack Hawley

I find myself totally in love with one of the world's most ancient spiritual texts, the *Bhagavad Gita*. This amazes me because I have never been very interested in scriptures, religion and all that stuff. My wife Louise also loves the Gita, but this isn't so surprising. She's softer than me, less worldly.

So where did all this *amore* come from?

A quarter century ago when we were on our way up to a remote mountain top in southern India to be with our Teacher Sathya Sai Baba, we stopped for the night in a roadside guest house. Glad to have finally climbed above the scorching summer heat, parched for something to read, I picked up a tattered copy of the Gita from the little bed table. Flipping through it, I suddenly stopped where Krishna, the Divinity figure in the Gita's story, was presenting the clearest, most sublime description of the very nature of God I had ever heard. "Louise, this is God talking," I said, and proceeded to read several chapters aloud. Then we sat, rapt, silent, appreciating. Our great love affair with the Gita had begun.

Since then, fascinated, I have researched and written four books on the Gita. We're convinced that our total immersion in the Gita's teachings while writing my second book in India (*The Bhagavad Gita: A Walkthrough for Westerners*) saved Louise's life when she had a serious stroke (this story appears in the *Afterword* to that book).

Although sometimes referred to as a scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita* ("Song Celestial") is not just about God. It's an epic mystical poem about life, death, love and duty from the peoples who settled in the river valleys of what is now called India, and developed a sophisticated culture thousands—probably scores of thousands—of years ago. It's a half-inch thick masterpiece love song about the heights and depths of the human soul.

It lays out the moral and spiritual principles found in the very earliest scriptures of this ancient land. One of them, the *Rig Veda*, is said to be the oldest record of mankind! To read the Gita, therefore, is to reach countless epochs back in time. And yet, these almost prehistoric teachings feel strangely familiar now, as if coming from a comfortable place we shared in some primeval past.

I love this extreme ancientness. I'm awed that the Gita precedes by thousands of years the societies now referred to as "cradles of civilization." I know it sounds odd—me, a too modern man, revering a cobwebby old book—but it's not just its age. I venerate the fact that its utter truths have been tried, tested and purified down through so many centuries. Like water that gradually filters down through earth and comes out sparkling pure, these important ideas have passed down through the sands of time and been scrubbed clean in the process, eventually emerging as pure truth. So it's the *truth* I love, and the Gita is by now a fountain of truth. It gladdens me to drink of it.

What is the essential wisdom of this wondrous old book?

I love this question. While writing my latest book, *Essential Wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita* (a quick and hopefully easy entry into these teachings), I had to reach deep into my great affection for this old book for the answer.

The Gita's wisdom turns out not to be intellectual or theological abstractions but down to earth, usable ideas for living more happily. The real gold in it are its nuggets for living a fuller, more graceful and loving life. This is true wisdom.

The Gita's uncomplicated prescription for life in today's divisive, disturbing world is this: If you want to be truly happy—defined as being free from your present agitations and anguish—you have to *spiritualize your life*. This doesn't necessarily mean that you become more religious—but more spiritual. Bam, it's that simple!

I love too its audacious insistence that human suffering can indeed be overcome. Flying in the drooping face of the ubiquitous modern assumption that sorrow and pain are inevitable, the Gita argues that it is not. “The sure sign of a spiritual person is permanent cheerfulness,” it says, and then explains how to achieve this impossible dream.

I love the personal help I get from the Gita. It pulls me into my highest, most lofty nature, and then beyond even that. It repeatedly confirms and proves to me that I have within me all the glory and power of the universe—as does everyone else. Indeed, to reach this amazing loftiness is the aim of all spirituality.

And yet, in the final analysis—and this is indeed amazing—the *Bhagavad Gita* is not just about happiness, scholarly principles or erudite teachings, or even about the Gita itself. It's about *you*! It's about helping you slip quietly into your own inner truth. Your only real destination, after all, is your divinity within. In the end it's all you have.



This article is based on the book *Essential Wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita* © 2006 by Jack Hawley. Printed with permission of New World Library, Novato, California. www.newworldlibrary.com or 800-972-6657 ext. 52.

Jack Hawley, Ph.D., lives, studies, and lectures half of each year in an ashram in rural southern India, where the values of the Gita are very much alive. When not in India, he brings these ancient yet current ideas to leaders and organizations in the West. His books include the classic *Bhagavad Gita: a Walkthrough for Westerners*; *Reawakening the Spirit in Work: the Power of Dharmic Management*; *Roadmaps to Self-Realization*; and *Essential Wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita*. His website is GitaWalkthrough.com; his email is jack@GitaWalkthrough.com