

EXCERPT FROM THE *BHAGAVAD GITA* (TRANSL. BY BARBARA STOLER MILLER)

In the following selection from the Bhagavad Gita, narrated by a nobleman named Sanjaya, the warrior Arjuna is about to engage in a great battle. Before the battle, however, he converses with his chariot driver, who is Krishna, an avatar (earthly incarnation) of Lord Vishnu.

Questions:

1. What arguments does Arjuna give for not wishing to fight in the upcoming battle?
 2. What arguments does Krishna use to persuade him to fight? How do Krishna's arguments reflect Hindu beliefs?
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Sanjaya: Arjuna. . . saw Dhritarashtra's sons assembled as weapons were ready to clash, and he lifted his bow. He told his charioteer:

Arjuna: "Krishna, halt my chariot between the armies--Far enough for me to see these men who lust for war, ready to fight with me in the strain of battle.

I see men gathered here, eager to fight, bent on serving the folly of Dhritarashtra's son."

Sanjaya: When Arjuna had spoken, Krishna halted their splendid chariot between the armies. Arjuna saw them standing there: fathers, grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, and friends. He surveyed his elders and companions in both armies, all his kinsmen assembled together. Dejected, filled with strange pity, he said this:

Arjuna: "Krishna, I see my kinsmen gathered here, wanting war.

My limbs sink, my mouth is parched, my body trembles, the hair bristles on my flesh.

The magic bow slips from my hand, my skin burns, I cannot stand still, my mind reels.

I see omens of chaos, Krishna; I see no good in killing my kinsmen in battle.

Krishna, I seek no victory, or kingship or pleasures.

What use to us are kingship, delights, or life itself?

We sought kingship, delights, and pleasures for the sake of those assembled to abandon their lives and fortunes in battle.

They are teachers, fathers, sons, and grandfathers, uncles, grandsons, fathers and brothers of wives, and other men of our family.

I do not want to kill them even if I am killed, Krishna; not for kingship of all three worlds, much less for the earth.

What joy is there for us, Krishna, in killing Dhritarashtra's sons?

Evil will haunt us if we kill them, though their bows are drawn to kill.

Honor forbids us to kill our cousins, Dhritarashtra's sons; how can we know happiness if we kill our own kinsmen?

The greed that distorts their reason blinds them to the sin they commit in ruining the family, blinds them to the crime of betraying friends.

How can we ignore the wisdom of turning from this evil when we see the sin of family destruction, Krishna?

When the family is ruined, the timeless laws of family duty perish; and when duty is lost, chaos overwhelms the family.

In overwhelming chaos, Krishna, women of the family are corrupted; and when women are corrupted, disorder is born in society.

This discord drags the violators and the family itself to hell; for ancestors fall when rites of offering rice and water lapse.

The sins of men who violate the family create disorder in society that undermines the constant laws of caste and family duty.

Krishna, we have heard that a place in hell is reserved for men who undermine family duties.

I lament the great sin we commit when our greed for kingship and pleasures drives us to kill our kinsmen.

If Dhritarashtra's armed sons kill me in battle when I am unarmed and offer no resistance, it will be my reward."

Sanjaya: Saying this in the time of war, Arjuna slumped into the chariot and laid down his bow and arrows, his mind tormented by grief. Arjuna sat dejected, filled with pity, his sad eyes blurred by tears. Krishna gave him counsel.

Krishna: "Why this cowardice in time of crisis, Arjuna?"

The coward is ignoble, shameful, foreign to the ways of heaven.

Don't yield to impotence.

It is unnatural in you.

Banish this petty weakness from your heart.

Rise to the fight, Arjuna."

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

It is better in this world to beg for scraps of food than to eat meals smeared with the blood of elders I killed at the height of their power while their goals were still desires.

We don't know which weight is worse to bear, our conquering them or them their conquering us.

We will not want to live if we kill the sons of Dhritarashtra assembled before us.

The flaw of pity blights my very being; conflicting sacred duties confound my reason.

I ask you to tell me decisively, Which is better?"

I am your pupil.

Teach me what I seek.

I see nothing that could drive away the grief that withers my senses; even if I won kingdoms of unrivaled wealth on earth and sovereignty over gods."

Sanjaya: Arjuna told this to Krishna, then saying, "I shall not fight," he fell silent. Mocking him gently, Krishna gave this counsel as Arjuna sat dejected, between the two armies.

Krishna: "You grieve for those beyond grief, and you speak words of insight; but learned men do not grieve for the dead or the living.

Never have I not existed, nor you, nor these kings; and never in the future shall we cease to exist.

Just as the embodied self enters childhood, youth, and old age, so does it enter another body; this does not confound a steadfast man.

Contacts with matter make us feel heat and cold, pleasure and pain.

Arjuna, you must learn to endure fleeting things, they come and go.

When these cannot torment a man, when suffering and joy are equal for him and he has courage, he is fit for immortality.

Nothing of nonbeing comes to be, nor does being cease to exist; the boundary between these two is seen by men who see reality.

Indestructible is the presence that pervades all this; no one can destroy this unchanging reality.

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

He who thinks this self a killer and he who thinks it killed, both fail to understand; it does not kill, nor is it killed.

It is not born, it does not die; having been, it will never not be; unborn, enduring, constant, and primordial, it is not killed when the body is killed.

Arjuna, when a man knows the self to be indestructible, enduring and unborn, unchanging, how does he kill or cause anyone to kill?

As a man discards worn-out clothes to put on new and different ones, so the embodied self discards its worn-out bodies to take on other new ones.

Weapons do not cut it, fire does not burn it, waters do not wet it, wind does not wither it.

It cannot be cut or burned; it cannot be wet or withered; it is enduring, all-pervasive, fixed, immovable, and timeless.

It is called unmanifest, inconceivable, and immutable; since you know that to be so, you should not grieve.

If you think of its birth and death as ever-recurring; then too, Great Warrior, you have no cause to grieve.

Death is certain for anyone born, and birth is certain for the dead; since the cycle is inevitable, you have no cause to grieve.

The self embodied in the body of every being is indestructible; you have no cause to grieve for all these creatures, Arjuna.

Look to your own duty; do not tremble before it; nothing is better for a warrior than a battle of sacred duty.

The doors of heaven open for warriors who rejoice to have a battle like this thrust on them by chance.

If you fail to wage this war of sacred duty, you will abandon your own duty and fame only to gain evil.

People will tell of your undying shame, and for a man of honor shame is worse than death.

The great chariot warriors will think you deserted in fear of battle; you will be despised by those who held you in esteem.

Your enemies will slander you, scorning your skill in so many unspeakable ways, could any suffering be worse?

If you are killed, you win heaven; if you triumph, you enjoy the earth; therefore, Arjuna, stand up and resolve to fight the battle.

Impartial to joy and suffering, gain and loss, victory and defeat, arm yourself for the battle, lest you fall into evil. -- **END**