



**Digital Commons@**

Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

---

Theological Studies Faculty Works

Theological Studies

---

Fall 2005

## Yoga and the Gita: Isvara-Pranidhana and Bhakti

Christopher Key Chapple

*Loyola Marymount University*, [cchapple@lmu.edu](mailto:cchapple@lmu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac](https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac)



Part of the [Hindu Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Chapple, Christopher Key. "Yoga and the Gita: Isvara-Pranidhana and Bhakti." In *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*. Volume 14, No. 1. Fall, 2005. Pp. 29-42.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theological Studies at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theological Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).

## YOGA AND THE *GĪTĀ*: ĪŚVARA-PRANIDHĀNA AND BHAKTI

Christopher Key Chapple

**T**he classical Yoga tradition of Patañjali, generally known for its non-theistic foundation in classical Sāṅkhya, includes a series of statements that discuss the nature of “the Lord” or Īśvara. Surendranath Dasgupta notes that “of all the points of difference between Yoga and Sāṅkhya the admission of Īśvara . . . [is] the most important . . .”<sup>1</sup> In the *Yoga Sūtra*, Patañjali outlines practices within his passages on Īśvara-praṇidhāna that are also known within Bhakti Yoga, including the recitation of mantra. This study will analyze the *Yoga Sūtra* passages on Īśvara in light of the *Bhagavad Gītā*’s discussion of Bhakti Yoga, which begins in chapter seven, culminates in chapter eleven, and is further explained in chapter twelve. By juxtaposing the technical theory of Īśvara with the narrative explication of divinity or *avatāra* in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, comparisons and contrasts will arise between the Raja Yoga of Patañjali and the Bhakti Yoga of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Īśvara finds mention in three places in the *Yoga Sūtra*. The first includes a full segment of the first book of the text, the *Samādhi Pāda*, which will be discussed more fully below. The second two mentions are much briefer, and occur in the second book, the *Sādhana Pāda*. These passages place Īśvara-praṇidhāna in the list of three-fold Kriyā Yoga (II:1) and in eight-fold Aṣṭāṅga Yoga (II:32, 45). “Dedication to Īśvara,” according to Patañjali, results in the perfection of *samādhi* (*samādhi-siddhi*). For hermeneutical purposes, I will propose later in this essay that *samādhi* be understood as an epiphany, a moment of being overwhelmed with deeply spiritual feelings. When Arjuna moves into his full encounter with Krishna’s true identity, his state of awe and amazement could be seen as akin to Patañjali’s description

of *samādhi*, seeing things (in this case Krishna) in light of their true nature (*sva-rūpa*).

### Īśvara in the *Samādhi Pāda*

The *Yoga Sūtra* divides into a series of themed passages or pericopes. One of these pericopes, the discussion of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, extends over two books, including the final passages of the *Sādhana Pāda* and the first section of the *Vibhūti Pāda*. The *Samādhi Pāda* pericope on the nature of Īśvara spans twelve verses, marked by the inclusion of the conjunctive particle *vā* which serves to book-end each section. The discussion of Īśvara comprises one of the most extensive discourses within the text, and hence indicates the importance Patañjali gave to this particular topic. This segment of the text defines Īśvara, designates how to develop a practice of chanting, lists benefits that accrue from this practice, itemizes obstacles that can be removed, and advises one to conduct one's activities within the world in such a way that will imitate godly behavior. This last aspect often finds treatment separate from the discussion of Īśvara. However, because the separating word *vā* does not appear until the 34th *sūtra*, this concept will be explored in light of its relationship to Īśvara.

The pericope on Īśvara is translated as follows:

23. Or from dedication to Īśvara.
24. Īśvara is a distinct *puruṣa* untouched by afflictions, actions, fruitions, or their residue.
25. There the seed of omniscience is unsurpassed.
26. Due to its being unlimited by time, it is the teacher of the prior ones.
27. Its expression is *praṇava* (Om).
28. Repetition of it and realization of its purpose [should be made].
29. Thus inward-consciousness is attained and obstacles do not arise.
30. These obstacles, distractions of the mind are: sickness, dullness, doubt, carelessness, laziness, sense addiction, false view, non-attainment, and instability.
31. A dissatisfied, despairing body and unsteady inhalation and exhalation accompany the distractions.
32. For the purpose of counteracting them, there is the practice of one thing (*eka tattva*).
33. Clarification of the mind [results] from the cultivation of friendliness, compassion, happiness, and equanimity in conditions of pleasure, dissatisfaction, merit, and absence of merit, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

This passage evinces a series of themes and ideas that stake very specific claims regarding the definition of a personalized divine in Indian tradition. This section of text follows an extended discussion of the two means for achieving restraint (*nirodha*), practice (*abhyāsa*) and dispassion (*vairāgya*). The accomplishment of these two keys to the goal of Yoga manifests in three ways: those who earnestly and with vigor (*samvega*) pursue the path of Yoga, those who take a more moderate (*madhya*) approach, and those who easily fall back into the ignorant patterns of behavior (*pruṅṅtilāya*). Dedication to the Lord is presented as the first alternative to this two-fold practice, followed by a list of several other options.

The term “dedication” (*praṇidhāna*), based on the Sanskrit root *dhā*, which means “to place,” evokes images of placing offerings in front of the object of one’s affection or devotion. These could be any sort of offering, real or virtual, from the traditional flowers and fruit of *pūjā* sacrifices to offerings of prayer and chant, and also to offerings to abide by particular vows in honor of one’s chosen deity. However, Īsvara in whatever chosen form (*iṣṭadevatā*, II:44), is not capable of any reciprocal action. The definition of Īsvara specifies that this Lord does not perform any action or hold the results or residue of former action. As articulated by the anthropologist Alan Babb, this creates a paradox, or a somewhat interesting theological dilemma. If people make offerings to a deity who does not care about the donors and from whom the donors can expect no benefit, why would anyone bother to perform acts of dedication (*praṇidhāna*)?<sup>3</sup>

Īsvara as portrayed in the *Yoga Sūtra* functions in a manner similar to how a Tirthānkara functions in the Jain tradition: as an exemplar and model, but not a reciprocator. The worshiper cannot expect any reward or benefit from worshipping this ideal and must operate from a place of no expectations, a place of dispassion (*vairāgya*). Whitney Kelting has suggested that the function of such forms of worship is for the cultivation within oneself of the qualities manifested by the deity.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Patañjali, the qualities are qualified as having no qualities, of not bearing “afflictions, actions, fruitions, or their residue” (I:24). By imitating the absence of all fettering karmas, one refashions oneself in the model of the perfected being or *siddha*. As we will see, the *Gītā* provides narrative descriptions of such an individual and, true to the this-worldly theology of the *Mahābhārata*, suggests that this can benefit life within the world. One remains detached while engaged in daily activities.

This brings us to Patañjali's discussion of omniscience (*sarvajña*), the function of time, and the role of the teacher as defined by Patañjali. Omniscience in this philosophy involves a total absence of karma. In the most elevated state, the Lord observes all activities past, present, and future because that person has never been attached to karma. The aspirant, in imitation of Īvara, has chosen to disassociate himself or herself from the various modes (*guṇa*) of activities. The impetus to commit further action has been diminished by acknowledging the existence of a being or beings who have never fallen under the spell of desire, attachment, birth, death, and rebirth. Because this ideal person has never fallen into a time-delineated stream of karmic action, this person never can be touched by time or assigned a designated place within an historical sequence. All persons who seek to escape the spell of karma turn to this paradigm of perfection, defined here as never having been trapped. Regardless of how one might conceptualize such an ideal, the timeless and quality-free nature of such a person will over-ride all considerations. Hence, Patañjali regards Īvara, as a conceptual category, to be the paradigm for all spiritual attainment. Patañjali allows all persons seeking transcendence to share in a common platform that defies specific naming, defies taking on any specific qualities or designations. Whether one is a Jain or a Buddhist or a Vaishnava or Shaiva or even a Christian, the process of re-fashioning oneself in light of the chosen deity would be similar. One aspires to be freed from all affects and effects of karma.

The transcendent structure in the "person" of Īvara provides a theological basis for doing Yoga. Patañjali then discusses specific two practices for enacting this theology and lists their benefits: recitation of mantra, which results in the removal of obstacles, and the adoption of an active interactive ethical observance, which results in the desired state of being nonplussed or dispassionate in one's dealings with other people.

Mantra practice for Patañjali, keeping true to his stance of ecumenism and/or a commitment not to advance any one particular theological agenda, describes a single syllable associated with Īvara. He does not name this syllable, but refers to it as the *praṇava*, which translates as a sound or exultation issued forth. The commentarial tradition agrees that this refers to the utterance of "ōm" but in fact it could refer to any syllable that for the practitioner evokes the non-qualities or transcendent nature of Īvara. Patañjali specifies that this syllable should be repeated and that one should actively cultivate an appreciation of how this syllable symbolizes transcendence and

inspires the aspirant to move toward the state of dispassion and omniscience. Chanting takes many forms, both private and public, in the lived tradition, from initiation into a private mantra to large public worship events, where people gather to chant and sing the names of particular deities, generally for extended periods of time. This results in a state of purification, generally accompanied with bliss, repose, and removal from the concerns of karmic existence. As a daily practice, mantra falls within the category of *abhyāsa*, to be “firmly situated” and “carefully attended to for a long time without interruption” (I:14). Through repeated return to the equipoise created by recitation of mantra, one creates a spiritual habit that helps counteract negative tendencies.

When one gains fluency in the practice of mantra, one’s awareness turns inward and various debilities disappear. These obstacles, virtually all of which Arjuna exhibits in the first chapter of the *Gītā*, include physical illness, lack of resilience, “doubt, carelessness, laziness, sense addiction, false view, non-attainment of a stage, and instability” (I:30) as well as a pained body and uneven breath. The benefits of overcoming states of physical and mental ills can be seen in the wholesomeness of their opposites: well-being, brightness, certainty, vigilance, enthusiasm, self-assuredness, clear thinking, groundedness, stability, health, and evenness of breath. As we will see, by the end of the *Gītā*, Arjuna announces that he can move forward, having absorbed and embodied the teachings of Krishna. He has overcome his obstacles and attained a place of strength.

The last practice within the series of passages on the nature of *Iśvara* advocates the adoption of ethical practices that one might adopt in order to replicate the way in which an omniscient being might behave in the hypothetical situation of being engaged within worldly activity. This speaks to the need for comportment, the need to carry oneself in the world as if one were aloof from the weight of karmic attachment. Perhaps similar to the Greek and Roman philosophy of stoicism, this provides a blueprint for maximizing life without falling prey to addiction or petty judgmental thinking. This practice will help Arjuna to release his attachment to the named specificity of the family and friends he must face in battle.

This practice begins by loosely grouping all human beings into four categories: The first (*sukha*) refers to people who enjoy pleasure within the world and move through the world with ease. The second (*duḥkha*) includes people who experience repeated dissatisfaction and suffering. The third (*punya*) speaks of virtuous people who behave in accordance with

scriptural teachings and righteousness (*dharma*). The fourth category refers to the evil ones (*apunya*) who violate basic principles of human dignity and harm themselves and other people as a result. In order to cultivate peace of mind within oneself, the *Yoga Sūtra* advises that one develop friendliness toward those people for whom life is easy, to develop compassion (not disdain) for those who suffer within the world, to regard the virtuous with gladness, and to apply equanimity or indifference in the face of evil, rather than crusading vehemently for its elimination. Psychologically, this last precept seems to bear similarity to Japan's Samurai ethic, wherein a warrior must act from a place of clarity and not hatred in battle.

The benefit of this fourfold practice can be found in the emergence of a clear mind (*citta prasāda*), which, as we will see, Arjuna in fact adopts before entering battle. By offering an assessment of four personality types and by suggesting strategies for auspicious interactions in each of the four arenas, Patañjali has suggested the ways in which one can model one's own behavior in the world according to what one might imagine would be done if *Īsvara* were to enter into the worldly domain. This same strategy is called the *Brahma Vihara* in early Buddhism, and Richard Gombrich claims that this signals the way of the *arhats*, that is, describes the approach to life taken by those students of the Buddha who attained enlightenment.<sup>5</sup>

In summary, dedication to *Īsvara* in the *Yoga Sūtra* provides a non-partisan theological definition of the spiritual ideal being who never becomes muddled by karma. This personification, regardless of whatever provisional name one might use, knows all things and serves as the exemplar for all spiritual behavior. Through recitation of the name that betokens this state of being, one conquers an array of obstacles, both mental and physical. Through adopting the ethical and psychological stance that would logically be manifested by a divine being, one can move through the world, mixing with all sorts of people, without being trapped into jealousy, hatred, envy, or judgmental thinking.

### Krishna and Arjuna

The *Bhagavad Gītā* presents a model for spiritual discernment that can be viewed as a case example of the theory of *Īsvara* as found in the *Yoga Sūtra*. Krishna functions as an *avatāra* or emissary of Vishnu. Although he appears as an ordinary relative of the Kuru clan, the *Mahābhārata* hints of his divine stature at various places, including when the Pāndavas humiliate their

cousins in Indraprastha and when Draupadi successfully appeals to Krishna to prevent herself from being disrobed. However, it is not until the *Gītā* that Arjuna comes to a full realization of Krishna's status as an *avatāra*.

Krishna and Arjuna exist in spiritual symbiosis. Arjuna personifies the state of physical, mental, and spiritual suffering. In the first chapter of the *Gītā* he demonstrates nearly all the symptoms of a person riddled with obstacles of the sort mentioned in the *Yoga Sūtra*: sickness, doubt, false view, and overall instability and malaise. Krishna holds forth to Arjuna the spiritual ideal, both in his own person and in his descriptions of the accomplished Yogi or Siddha. Through his encounter with Krishna, Arjuna gains release from his hesitancy and readily enters the battle, which, as noted by Mahatma Gandhi, provides a metaphor for life and action in the world.<sup>6</sup> The unfolding of this relationship in many ways mirrors the progression of the *Īsvara* practice as found in the *Yoga Sūtra*.

To begin, Arjuna presents the worst possible state of the human condition. Those family members and friends to whom he should feel loyalty have betrayed him. Led by his cousin Duryodhana, they have tried to kill him, his brothers, and his wife. They successfully banished Arjuna, his four brothers, and their wife for thirteen years, and have scorned their pleas for peace and reconciliation. Even Krishna has failed in his attempts to negotiate a settlement. As a result, Arjuna collapses under the weight of this karmic burden. Arjuna proclaims "My limbs become weak, my mouth dries up, my body trembles" (BG I:29).<sup>7</sup> As in the list of obstacles in the *Yoga Sūtra*, he falls into sickness and dullness. He is filled with doubt about entering into battle, stating that "It would be better for me if Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons would slay me, weapons in hand, unarmed and unresisting" (I:46). He claims that his "mind is reeling" and, as I have explained elsewhere, enters on a long discourse about the ills of war that makes no sense.<sup>8</sup> His "false view" ignores the slights and insults and assassination attempts that he and his brothers and wife have suffered at the hands of the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. He is clinging to the sentimental notion that his family members inherently merit protection, when in fact they have betrayed him repeatedly. As a result, he has no grounding, no stability, and falls into despair. He cries out to Krishna, "My inmost being is stricken by this flaw of pity . . . my mind is confused about dharma . . . I do not see what would take from me this grief which dries up my senses" (II:7-8).

Arjuna begs Krishna to relieve him of his distress, to help him find firm ground upon which to stand. During chapters two through six of the *Gītā*,

Krishna instructs Arjuna in a straightforward manner about two styles of Yoga: Jñāna and Karma. He reminds Krishna that the soul is imperishable, that the constructed phenomena of the world constantly shift, and that he needs to see the difference between the two in order to achieve peace of mind. He also tells him to act without attachment to the fruits of his action, to do his appointed dharma out of a sense of duty not from place of ego-driven agency. These teachings, distilled from the vast traditions of the Upaniṣads, Sāṅkhya, Vedānta, and Yoga, help remind Arjuna of his place within society and the importance of each individual in contributing to the smooth operation of the world. Beginning in chapter seven, Krishna introduces a twist into an otherwise predictable series of philosophical lessons: He pronounces divinity within himself and shows that divine nature to Arjuna.

### Krishna as Īśvara in the *Bhagavad Gītā*

The concepts of *avatāra* and Īśvara carry somewhat incommensurate meanings. An *avatāra* manifests divinity within the world. Krishna states that “whenever there is a decrease in dharma and a rise in adharmā, then I send forth myself. For the protection of the good and the destruction of evil, for the purpose of the establishment of dharma, I am born from age to age” (IV:7-8). God takes birth in the form of an *avatāra* for the purpose of re-establishing order within the world. This contradicts the definition of Īśvara in the *Yoga Sūtra* who never becomes sullied with the messy business of karma. However, a structural relationship can be found between these two visions.

Krishna presents a description of the paradigmatic Yogi. When Arjuna asks him “What is the mark of the man of firm wisdom?” (II:54), Krishna describes a person who is freed from all karma:

He whose mind is not troubled in the midst of sorrows,  
Is free from desire in the midst of pleasures,  
From whom passion, fear, and anger have departed,  
He is said to be a sage of steady-wisdom (II:56).

Like the sage practicing the Brahma Vihāra, the Yogi dwells within the midst of various forms of activity but without attachment. Krishna states that one needs to hold oneself in a state of equipoise, and that “the objects

of sense recede from the embodied one who abstains from feeding on them" (II:59). For such an individual, the intelligence (*buddhi*) becomes firmly established (*prutiṣṭhitā*). The ideal behavior of the accomplished Yogi imitates Īsvara in that both transcend entrenchment within the realm of sensory change.

Krishna begins in earnest to announce his divine status in chapter seven of the *Gītā*. His self-description, as we will see, clearly exceeds the tightly circumscribed and terse definition of Īsvara in the *Yoga Sūtra* as omniscient, not limited by time or karma, and the primal teacher. However, some functional and structural similarities between the two may be discerned, as well as some profound differences.

*Avatāra* theology differs rather remarkably from Vedantic panentheism and Sāṅkhya-Yoga dualism. In Vedānta, all beings and manifestations take part in the *saguṇa* form of absolute reality. Each particular being serves as potential reminder and key to a connection with the underlying silent, true, unmanifest (*nirguṇa*) nature of the universe. Though things appear in their multiplicity, unity in non-dual consciousness underlies all things. For Sāṅkhya and Yoga, the realm of change and manifestation (*prakṛti*) carries on under the gaze of an aloof, uninvolved, inactive witness consciousness (*cit-śakti* or *puruṣa*). Īsvara fits within this latter system as the imagined, idealized inspiration to move oneself into the mode of witness consciousness.

Krishna, as *avatāra*, espouses theologies of both aloofness and involvement. An *avatāra* symbolizes the universal consciousness in that this person witnesses all occasions from outside a time-bound perspective. At the same time an *avatāra* proclaims ownership of the realm of change, named by Krishna as his "lower *prakṛti*": earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, understanding, and the sense of I (VII:4). In the Sāṅkhya system, these aspects of reality would be considered inert and nonsentient; for Krishna, they comprise active aspects of his very being. For Krishna, the things of the universe are none other than himself, "like jewels on a string" (VII:7). He celebrates not only the elements, but the sensory connection between the body and the elements, announcing himself to be the "taste in the waters, the radiance in the sun and moon, the pleasant fragrance in earth, the glowing brightness in fire" (VII:8-9). He proclaims ownership of ritual and of the Vedic text, stating "I am the father of this world, the mother, the supporter, the grandsire" (IX:17). Referring to the Vedic and post-Vedic pantheon, Krishna proclaims identity with the Ādityas, the Maruts, Śiva, the protector gods, the gods of plenty, as well as with the sages, great trees, and men who

achieved perfection. He also claims to be the best of weapons, of snakes and serpents, of purifiers, of letters, of verses and meters, and of death (IX:21-37).

Krishna reveals his ultimate divine form as time itself to Arjuna in the eleventh chapter, where the narrative perspective changes. Instead of listening to Krishna describe himself, the text shifts to the voice of Arjuna, who narrates his witnessing of Krishna's power and divinity. Arjuna, who previously had been so adverse to the notion of killing his kith and kin, now sees them all being destroyed in the mouth of time, the mouths of Krishna: "Just as moths with great speed enter into the flaming fire and perish there, so also these creatures with great speed enter your mouths to meet destruction" (XI:29). He goes on to affirm Krishna's earlier self-declarations, stating "You are the first of gods . . . the knower and what is to be known" (XI:38). This vision inspires awe and fear within Arjuna, who begs Krishna to return to his "two-armed" form, after which the dialogue continues in a more earthly vein.

In the revelation of Krishna as a divine being, direct references are made to aspects of Krishna that relate to the *Yoga Sūtra* description of Īśvara. Krishna suggests that one practice the recitation of mantra, a central facet of the later Krishna devotional movement. In the *Gītā*, instead of suggesting the traditional Hare Krishna mantra, Krishna states:

He who utters Om, which is Brahman,  
Meditates on me as he goes forth and abandons his body,  
He reaches the highest goal (VIII:13).

The connection between Krishna, Brahman, and Om differs from the more technical correlation between Īśvara and non-association with all forms of karma in the *Yoga Sūtra*. The *Gītā* cosmicizes Om; the *Yoga Sūtra* exhibits a much more restrained metaphysical approach in explaining the nature and purpose of the recitation of Om. In the *Gītā*, one uses Om as a bridge to totality (Brahman) and the worship of a specific deity form (Krishna). In the *Yoga Sūtra*, Om cultivates inward consciousness and removes a host of karmic obstacles. The *Gītā* emphasizes an ornate theological connection; the *Yoga Sūtra* emphasizes practical benefits.

Another aspect of the *Gītā* in light of the Yoga system can be found in its articulation of witnessing, of employing the gaze, both in terms of how one enters into the witness consciousness and how Arjuna witnesses and gazes

upon Krishna as the manifestation of divinity. Krishna proclaims “I am the witness . . . the final shelter, abode, and friend” (IX:18). This passage seems to allude to the final goal and perhaps even the content of the final verse of Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra*: “The return to the origin of the modes (*guṇas*), emptied of their own purpose for consciousness (*puruṣa*), the steadfastness in own form, and the power of higher awareness (*cit-śakti*, the witness)” (YS IV:34). By gazing upon Krishna in his divine visage, Arjuna attains a milestone upon the spiritual path. Time is suspended during this moment of epiphany. Arjuna gains the distance from his situation sufficient to think differently about his predicament and eventually recover his resolve. Without the shock of witnessing this profound vision, Arjuna probably would not have been able to continue. Like a Yogi who “sees the self abiding in every being and sees every being in the self” (BG VI:29), Arjuna no longer sees isolated bits of players within time but recognizes a continuity between beings within the body of Krishna. He meets the description of one for whom “gold, a stone, a clod of earth are the same” (VI:8).

To relate the revelatory moment in chapter eleven of the *Gītā* to the *Yoga Sūtra*, I would like to suggest that we focus on the experience of Arjuna rather than on the descriptions of Krishna’s divinity in Chapter Eleven. The function of this epiphany is not for the benefit of Krishna but for the change of heart that occurs within Arjuna. Patañjali defines *samādhi* as the collapse of distinctions between grasper, grasping, and grasped, wherein the person or witness becomes like a clear jewel (YS I:41). All separation between subject and object disappears. In the *Sāṅkhya Kārikā* this moment happens when the dancer *prahṛti* realizes she is being watched and runs away in embarrassment. For Arjuna, the epiphany of seeing the true nature of Krishna results in a similar form of embarrassment. He begs Krishna for forgiveness for “whatever was said in rashness or negligence or affection” (XI:41). After this encounter, Arjuna becomes newly receptive to listen to Krishna’s teachings of Jñāna Yoga and Karma Yoga and eventually finds himself “standing firmly, with doubt dispelled” (XVIII:73). The journey of the *Gītā* from despair to knowledge and vision leads to a rebuilt Arjuna, now capable of continuing with his duty.

### **Bhakti Yoga and Īsvara-praṇidhāna**

In the twelfth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Krishna explains the nature of those who have devoted themselves to his worship. He begins with an

acknowledgment of the possibility of entering into states of worship that do not required a fixed object, or an object that has no qualities, like Īśvara in the *Yoga Sūtra*:

Those who worship the imperishable and undefinable,  
 The unmanifested, the omnipresent, and unthinkable,  
 The immovable, the unchanging, the constant,  
 Who restrain all their senses, are even-minded,  
 Who delight in the welfare of every being,  
 They also obtain me (XII:3-4).

This description echoes and perhaps reflects the Īśvara-praṇidhāna pericope of the *Yoga Sūtra*, which states that the goal of inspiration is “untouched by afflictions, actions, fruitions, or their residue” and “unlimited by time” (YS I:24, 26). The description of being free from karma and beyond time corresponds to the array of adjectives used by Krishna to describe the imperishable. Krishna refers to those who follow this form of worship as having restrained their senses and gained the state of being even-minded, like the inward-consciousness mentioned in the *Yoga Sūtra*. These accomplishments result in the overturning of obstacles and, in the case of the *Gītā* also result in “delight in the welfare of every being,” similar to the adoption of friendliness, compassion, happiness, and equanimity in the *Yoga Sūtra*.

Krishna goes on to praise the specific benefits of worshipping himself as a deity form, claiming that he delivers those who worship him “from the ocean of death and rebirth” (XII:7). For those who are not able to devote themselves to either the formless or his own form, he recommends Karma Yoga. He restates various qualities common to all doers of Yoga, including fearlessness, equanimity, and non-partiality. The chapter ends with a statement that Krishna considers his own devotees to be “exceedingly dear” (XII:20).

### Conclusion

The option to choose devotion to any one of a variety of deities distinguishes the Hindu tradition from most other religions. The *Yoga Sūtra* presents an explanation of how this practice works. Metaphysically, the object of one’s devotion must be seen as not becoming involved in the worldly or karmic realm. Practically, one should repeat mantras in honor of this deity.

Ethically, one should pattern one's interactions with other people in imitation of the way an aloof deity, untouched by karma, might behave if involved with the world. This fashioning of the Īśvara ideal works well with systems that posit a clean division between the world of *samsāra* and release into *nirvāṇa*, such as Theravada Buddhism and Jainism. Even though their heroic figures, Shakyamuni Buddha and the Tīrthaṅkaras, once lived a worldly life, they now dwell in a state of eternal liberation, referred to as *parinirvāṇa* or *kevala*.

The concept of the *avatāra* within Hinduism and even the bodhisattva of Mahayana Buddhism challenge the ideal of Īśvara. Both the *avatāra* and the bodhisattva make a conscious choice to enter into the world and engage the world for the sake of increasing auspiciousness and goodness. By the definition put forward by Patañjali, Īśvara can never become enmeshed in the operations of karma, and hence could never enter an epic narrative or hold an historical biography. By this definition, Īśvara cannot be equated with the *avatāra* Krishna nor with the historical personage of Buddha or Mahavira. Īśvara remains aloof, though devotees of Īśvara change themselves due to acts of inspiration dedicated to Īśvara. Through mantra practice they remove karmic obstacles. Through ethical comportment, they obtain purified minds. The system of dedicating oneself to Īśvara emphasizes the transformations that take place in the devotee.

In some ways, the results of Īśvara-praṇidhāna and Bhakti Yoga appear to be the same. Both result in a diminishment of karma and a state of equipoise. In both traditions, the practitioner moves within the world in a state of nonattachment. However, whereas Īśvara does not model or advocate such involvement, the *avatāra* in the form of Krishna urges Arjuna to carry forth his dharma, to engage the world. The this-worldly spirituality of the epic tradition, which celebrates the story and drama of life, stands in contrast to the world-negating asceticism of classical Yoga, though, as we have seen, the traditions are closely related and complementary. Though Īśvara might not have a history or a story, both Lords, ascetic and epic, inspire the devotee on a path of self purification.

### Endnotes

1. Surendranath Dasgupta, *Yoga as Philosophy and Religion* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978, first edition, London, 1924), p. 163.

2. Translation by Christopher Chapple and Yogi Anand Viraj (Eugene P. Kelly,

Jr.), *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: An Analysis of the Sanskrit with Accompanying English Translation* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1990), pp. 19, 42-48.

3. Lawrence Alan Babb, *Absent Lord: Ascetics and Kings in a Jain Ritual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

4. Kelting quotes a female mendicant: "If you put a magnet against iron for a long time, slowly the iron becomes magnetic, the iron becomes a magnet. . . . If you go to the temple everyday and in front of the Jinas say the Navkar [prayer], then maybe some of their qualities will stick to you. The more times, the more will stick to you." M. Whitney Kelting, *Singing to the Jinas: Jain Laywomen, Mandal Singing, and the Negotiation of Jain Devotion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 113.

5. Richard Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of Early Teachings* (London: Athlone Press, 1996), p. 60.

6. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Message of the Gita* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1959), p. 34.

7. Antonio T. de Nicolas, *The Bhagavad Gita: The Ethics of Decision-Making* (Berwick, Maine: Nicolas-Hays, 2004).

8. Christopher Key Chapple, "Arjuna's Argument: Family Secrets Unveiled" in *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Spring 2001, pp. 23-32.