

Bhagavad-gita chapter 4

4.1-3: The history of buddhi yoga

4.1: Krishna said (*śrī-bhagavān uvāca*): *Buddhi-yoga* is an eternally relevant science which I previously taught to the sun god, Vivasvān (*imaṁ vivasvate yogaṁ proktavān aham avyayam*). It was then passed down from Vivasvān to Vaivasvata Manu, and from Manu to King Ikṣvāku, the emperor of the earth planet (*vivasvān manave prāha manur ikṣvākave ’bravīt*).

Explanatory note:

Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa refers to this yoga as the essence of the Vedas, which are ever-fresh. In modern terms, this conveys something eternally relevant.

My Evidence:

“This yoga is eternal (*avyayam*), in the sense that it is the essence of the Vedas which are ever-fresh, and in the sense that its results are permanent.” (*Gīta Bhūṣaṇa* 4.1 commentary)

4.2: This most important knowledge was conveyed from teacher to student for many generations of kings (*evam paramparā-prāptam imaṁ rājarṣayo viduḥ*). However, over a long period of time, Arjuna, the teachings were gradually corrupted, and now they are lost (*sa kāleneha mahatā yogo naṣṭaḥ paran-tapa*).

4.3: The science of *buddhi-yoga* is a very ancient and profound esoteric teaching (*yogaḥ proktaḥ purātanaḥ rahasyaṁ hy etad uttamam*). The reason I am explaining it to you is because you love Me as your intimate friend, and I similarly love you (*sa evāyaṁ mayā te ’dya bhakto ’si me sakhā ceti*).

Explanatory note:

Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa explains that the loving friendship between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna is mutual.

My Evidence:

“This ancient yoga ... has been spoken today by Me—who am very attached to you as a friend, unto you—who are very attached to Me, as a friend. Because you are My devotee, surrendered to Me, and a friend, I have spoken it to you....” (*Gīta Bhūṣaṇa* 4.3 commentary)

4.4-8: Arjuna’s doubt and Krishna’s reply

4.4: Arjuna said (*arjuna uvāca*): You took birth in recent times (*aparam bhavato janma*), but Vivasvān was born millions of years ago (*param janma vivasvataḥ*). How, then, will anyone believe that early in his reign, You taught him buddhi-yoga (*katham etad vijānīyām tvam ādau proktavān iti*)?

Explanatory note:

In many places Śrīla Prabhupāda specifies that this conversation with Vivasvān took place many millions of years prior to the battle of Kurukṣetra.

My evidence:

“When Kṛṣṇa said that “This philosophy was spoken by Me to the sun-god millions of years ago,” Arjuna inquired, “My dear Kṛṣṇa, how can I believe that You spoke some millions of years ago this philosophy to the sun-god?” What was the answer? The answer is, Kṛṣṇa said, “Yes, millions and millions of times I also appeared, and you also appeared. The difference is that you do not remember; I remember.”” ([Lecture Address on July 11th, 1971, in Los Angeles](#))

4.5: The Supreme Lord said (*śrī-bhagavān uvāca*): I have appeared in many avatars, all of which are not different from Me (*bahūni me vyatītāni*), and since you are My friend, you always appear as My companion (*janmāni tava cārjuna*). Since I am omniscient, I remember all My appearances (*tāny aham veda sarvāṇi*). However, you cannot

remember because your memory has been covered by My inconceivable energy. I have done this so that, for the purpose of this pastime, you will think of yourself as Kuntī's son and destroy your enemies (*na tvam vettha paran-tapa*).

Explanatory note:

The ācāryas explain that Kṛṣṇa instructed Vivasvān when He previously appeared as another avatar. Kṛṣṇa's avatars are not different from Kṛṣṇa, but manifestations of His multifarious nature. Kṛṣṇa has covered Arjuna's memory with His powerful māyā to facilitate His pastime in which Arjuna, thinking of himself as Kuntī's son, destroys the enemy.

My Evidence:

“As I hold many, eternal forms within Myself like the vaidūrya gem which displays many colors, I taught him in another form previously. Intending to say this, the Lord says, ‘I have passed through many births. You, because you are My friend, also have passed through the same number of births. But you do not know this, because now your knowledge is covered for carrying out My pastimes, by My conceivable energy.’ (*Gīta Bhūṣaṇa* 4.5 commentary)

“In this verse, the Lord speaks with the intention to show that he instructs through the agency of his avatars. As I appear as various avatāras, and you also appear as my companion at that time. I know, since I am omniscient, being the Supreme Lord. You do not know, since I cover your knowledge for fulfilling the purpose of my pastimes. With knowledge covered, O afflicter of the enemy, you afflict (*tapa*) the enemies (*param*) by thinking of yourself as the son of Kuntī, a kṣatriya, during this life.” (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.5 commentary)

4.6: I, the Supreme Lord of all beings (*bhūtānām īśvaro 'pi san*), am inherently eternal. In other words, I do not need to take birth to exist (*ajo 'pi sann avyayātmā*). Nevertheless, I still appear as if taking birth, but I do so in My eternal unchanging spiritual body (*prakṛtiṁ svām adhiṣṭhāya sambhavāmy ātma-māyayā*).

Arjuna's unspoken question: "How often do You appear?"

Explanatory note:

Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur suggests a similar segue between verses 4.6 and 4.7.

My Evidence:

"When do I appear?' This verse answers." (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.7 commentary)

4.7: Kṛṣṇa said: Whenever the principles of religion deteriorate and irreligion increases, Arjuna (*yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata abhyutthānam adharmasya*).

Unable to tolerate this, I personally appear (*tadātmānam sṛjāmy aham*).

Explanatory note:

Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur says the Lord comes whenever He can no longer tolerate the deterioration of religion and the increase of irreligion.

My Evidence:

"I appear when I cannot tolerate both the destruction (*glāni*) of dharma and the increase (*abhyutthānam*) of adharma, in order to reverse the situation." (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.7 commentary)

Arjuna's unspoken question: The saintly kings punish wrongdoers while great spiritual teachers establish religion. So why do You say that You personally come to do this?

Explanatory note:

Both Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur and Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa suggest this same objection as a segue between verses 4.7 and 4.8.

My Evidence:

"But your devotees, the rājarṣis and brahmarṣis can rectify the destruction of dharma and increase of adharma. Then why is it necessary that You make an appearance?" (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.8 commentary)

"But Your devotees, the saintly kings, appear in order to wipe out the rise of adharma and destruction of dharma. So why do You say that You appear in order to do this?" (*Gīta Bhūṣaṇa* 4.8 commentary)

4.8: I come to relieve the misery of the great devotees who suffer in separation from Me (*paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām*). I also come to kill powerful demons who are unconquerable by anyone else (*vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām*). Finally, I need to personally come so that people can engage in the highest spiritual practice of hearing about, glorifying, remembering and worshipping Me (*dharma-saṁsthāpanārthāya*). For these three reasons, I appear in every yuga (*sambhavāmi yuge yuge*).

Explanatory note:

Both Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa and Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur explain that Kṛṣṇa comes to alleviate the suffering of highly advanced devotees who long to see Him, and to destroy powerful demons who no one else can overcome. Furthermore, He alone can establish the highest spiritual practice of hearing about, glorifying, remembering and worshipping Him.

My Evidence:

“My devotees are absorbed in relishing My form and qualities. They long to see My form, and thus suffer from not seeing My form. I appear in order to deliver them from this suffering, by showing My attractive form directly. I also appear to destroy those performing evil deeds, persons like Rāvaṇa and Kāmsa who torment My devotees and who cannot be killed by anyone except Me. I also appear to spread dharma, pure bhakti-yoga, with meditation on Me and deity worship only to Me, and Vedic dharma as well, which cannot be spread by anyone other than Me. These are the three reasons for My appearance.” (*Gīta Bhūṣaṇa 4.8 commentary*)

“I appear for delivering (*trāṇāya*) my dedicated devotees (*sādḥūnām*) whose hearts are bursting with longing, suffering due to their devotion; for destroying the evil-minded persons like Rāvaṇa, Kāmsa and Keśī, who give suffering to my devotees, and who cannot be killed except by me; and for establishing in a firm way the supreme dharma of meditating on me, worshipping, serving me and singing about me, which cannot be instituted by anyone but me (*saṁsthāpanārthāya*).” (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā 4.8 commentary*)

4.9–11: The benefit of understanding Kṛṣṇa's appearance

4.9: Liberation becomes easy for one who constantly hears about and glorifies My transcendental appearance and pastimes with full faith (*janma karma ca me divyam evaṁ yo vetti tattvataḥ*). After quitting the body, such a person does not take birth again in the material world but comes back to Me in My eternal spiritual abode, Arjuna (*tyaktvā dehaṁ punar janma naiti mām eti so 'rjuna*).

Explanatory note:

Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa explains that Kṛṣṇa comes personally because liberation becomes easy for one who hears about Kṛṣṇa's appearance and activities with firm faith that they are completely transcendental. I extrapolated, based on *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* 9.14, that hearing about and glorifying Kṛṣṇa must happen constantly to lead to liberation.

My Evidence:

“Let liberation, which is difficult to attain by numerous endeavors, using thousands of practices, become easily available for My exclusive devotees, through hearing about My birth and activities. I appear in this world for this purpose also. With this intention the Lord speaks this verse. I am the Lord of all, whose every wish is fulfilled, born in many eternally perfect forms such as Nṛsimha and Rāma, just like the vaidūrya gem which manifests many colors. A person should know that the birth and activities of such a Lord are non-material and eternal in the past, present, and future. He should furthermore have firm faith (*yo vetti tattvataḥ*) that My birth and activities are spiritual (*divyam*). That person, giving up his body, does not again take a material birth, O Arjuna.” (*Gīta Bhūṣaṇa* 4.9 commentary)

“*satataṁ kīrtayanto mām*” (*Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* 9.14)

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4.10: First one must undergo the austerity of understanding spiritual knowledge correctly. This is difficult because one must identify and reject misleading and dangerous opinions. Many people, however, have successfully done this (*bahavo jñāna-tapasā*).

Then one must give up attachment to hearing from and associating with people who speak nonsense—in other words, people who do not support their opinions with scriptural reference. One must also give up fear of such people, as well as anger towards them (*vīta-rāga-bhaya-krodhā*).

Only then is it possible to fully absorb one’s consciousness in hearing about, glorifying and remembering My birth and earthly pastimes (*man-mayā mām upāśritāḥ*). Through this process, one becomes purified and qualified to attain love for Me and personally associate with Me in My eternal abode (*pūtā mad-bhāvam āgatāḥ*).

Explanatory note:

Vīta-rāga-bhaya-krodhā: Śrīla Prabhupāda explains this line in terms of the different mentalities he encountered while preaching. Some found it difficult to accept Kṛṣṇa because they were deeply attached to sense gratification (attachment), others were attracted to impersonalism because they feared eternal personal identity (fear), and others became frustrated by the many contradictory theories about God (anger). From Śrīla Prabhupāda’s perspective, these are the first hurdles one must overcome in spiritual life.

Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur and Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa, however, interpret this line differently. They explain it as giving up attachment to, fear of, and anger towards people who contradict or obscure Kṛṣṇa’s teachings. According to them, this happens after *jñāna-tapasā* and is necessary if one is to progress to *man-mayā mām upāśritāḥ*—full absorption in Kṛṣṇa.

Man-mayā mām upāśritāḥ: Śrīla Prabhupāda briefly refers to this as acquiring a taste for hearing about Kṛṣṇa. Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa explains this simply as becoming absorbed in serving Kṛṣṇa with exclusive faith in Him. Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur expands on this further. He explains that this refers to absorption in hearing about, speaking or singing about, and remembering Kṛṣṇa’s birth-līlā and other pastimes. One attains this after successfully performing *jñāna-tapasā*.

Jñāna-tapasā: Śrīla Prabhupāda speaks only indirectly about this phrase by explaining that one must take guidance from the bona fide spiritual master and follow the

regulative principles of spiritual life. Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa and Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur unpack the phrase more fully. They explain that it is an austerity to understand difficult passages of scripture and see through false and dangerous teachings. This is the first step in spiritual life. By this process one gradually gives up attachment, fear and anger towards misteachers. One then attains absorption in Kṛṣṇa’s pastimes, and finally attains Kṛṣṇa’s personal association in His divine abode.

Mad-bhāvam āgatāḥ: In his purport, Śrīla Prabhupāda explains this as attaining the abode of the Lord. Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa describes it as directly associating with the Lord, while Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur explains it as attaining prema for Kṛṣṇa. I have incorporated all three insights.

I have borrowed from the purport of *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* 17.15 to expand on what Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur means by speaking “nonsense”.

My Evidence:

“Such wise persons have given up attachment to or affection for persons who speak nonsense ideas (*vīta-rāgāḥ*). My devotees have no fear of them, nor anger towards them. Why? Because they are preoccupied with meditating on, thinking of, hearing and singing about My birth and activities (*man-mayā*). They attained prema for Me (*mad-bhāvam*).” (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.10 commentary)

“Many persons in ancient times, being purified by the austerity of knowledge, attained bhāva for Me. That is the order of the sentence. Knowledge means ‘knowledge of My eternal birth and activities.’ Because this knowledge of My eternal birth and activities arises only by analysis of the difficult śruti passages, it is called an austerity. Or austerity can refer to the suffering arising in removal of the bad arguments and opposing ideas. Being purified by that removal of bad ideas, cleansed of ignorance, many persons attained prema for Me (*bhāvam*), or attained existence (*bhāvam*) with Me—direct association with Me. What type of people were these? These persons had given up attraction to, fear of, and hatred of those persons who opposed the eternality of the Lord’s birth, because they were completely engaged in serving Me (*upāśritāḥ*), with faith in Me alone (*man-mayā*).” (*Gīta Bhūṣaṇa* 4.10 commentary)

“Besides that, one should not talk nonsense. The process of speaking in spiritual circles is to say something upheld by the scriptures. One should at once quote from scriptural authority to back up what he is saying.” (*Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* 17.15 purport)

Arjuna’s unspoken doubt: “The jñānīs and yogīs also seek liberation, but they do not accept that Your birth and activities are transcendental. What happens to them?”

Explanatory note:

Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur suggests this segue between 4.10 and 4.11.

My Evidence:

“Your dedicated devotees consider your birth and activities to be eternal, but others such as jñānīs, surrendering to you for the purpose of perfecting jñāna or other goals, do not consider your birth and activities to be eternal.” (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.11 commentary)

4.11: To attain their respective goals, materialists, impersonalists and devotees must all follow the path I have established for surrendering to Me—hearing about and glorifying Me (*mama vartmānuvartante*).

Some worship Me because they desire material success, others because they seek impersonal liberation, and yet others because they desire My personal service (*ye yathā mām prapadyante*). Whatever their reason, all people must ultimately approach Me if they wish to attain success, O son of Pṛthā (*manuṣyāḥ pārtha sarvaśaḥ*). I will reciprocate accordingly and grant them their desired result (*tāms tathaiva bhajāmy aham*).

Explanatory note:

Prapadyante: All three ācāryas use the words “surrender” and “worship” interchangeably when unpacking this word. I have supported my interpretation of surrender by referring to Bhagavad-gītā As It Is 9.13–15, where different classes of transcendentalists are described as approaching Kṛṣṇa through hearing about and

glorifying Him. The meaning of *Bhagavad-gītā* 9.15 is further clarified with reference to the *ācāryas'* commentaries in *Gītā Flow's unpacking of Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* 9.15.

*** (If you are reading this before I have published the book or posted chapter 9 on our website, you need only ask me, and I will send you my current version of verses 9.13-15) ***

My Evidence:

“In whatever way they worship Me (*prapadyante*), I also give them the fruits of their worship (*bhajāmi*) in a similar manner.’ ... The *jñānīs* and others who surrender unto Me thinking of My birth and activities as temporary, and thinking of My deity forms as material—I throw those *jñānīs* again and again into the noose of *māyā*...” (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.11 commentary)

“I, the one Lord of all beings ... certainly (*eva*) respond (*bhajāmi*) to the devotees according to the mood in which (*yathā*) they worship (*prapadyante*) Me. ... All these men (*manuṣyāḥ sarvaśaḥ*) follow the path of worship (*vartma*).” (*Gīta Bhūṣaṇa* 4.11 commentary)

My Evidence:

“In whatever way they worship Me (*prapadyante*), I also give them the fruits of their worship (*bhajāmi*) in a similar manner.” (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.11 commentary)

“I ... respond (*bhajāmi*) to the devotees according to the mood in which (*yathā*) they worship (*prapadyante*) Me.” (*Gīta Bhūṣaṇa* 4.11 commentary)

See also *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* 9.13–15 and *Gītā Flow's* unpacking thereof.

4.12–15: The purpose of prescribed duty

4.12: But I digress by speaking about My transcendental appearance and activities. I began by telling you how I previously taught *buddhi-yoga* to the sun god and that I am now speaking it to you because it has become lost over time. You should know that very few people are interested in this knowledge.

Generally, people who want material success worship the demigods (*kāṅkṣantaḥ karmaṇām siddhiṁ yajanta iha devatāḥ*). This is because in human society material results come far more quickly than spiritual ones (*kṣipram hi mānuṣe loke siddhir bhavati karma-jā*).

Explanatory note:

Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa says that in this verse Kṛṣṇa wraps up His digression and returns to the main topic: buddhi-yoga. In verses 4.1–3 Kṛṣṇa began speaking about this subject. He explained that He had previously taught this knowledge to Vivasvān, but that it had gradually become lost over time, and so He was now repeating it to Arjuna.

Then, in verse 4.4, Arjuna asks how Kṛṣṇa could have instructed the sun god, who is far older than Him. In response, from verses 4.5–11 Kṛṣṇa digresses from the main topic of buddhi-yoga—also known as niṣkāma-karma-yoga—and speaks instead about His transcendental appearance and activities.

Now, in this verse, He returns to the original discussion. The first thing He explains is how rare it is for one to take to buddhi-yoga. Most people work for material results because such results are more quickly attainable.

My Evidence:

“Having spoken on a related but digressive topic, the Lord will now speak on the original topic by explaining how niṣkāma-karma transforms into jñāna. In this verse the Lord speaks about the rarity of such practitioners. ... They worship devatās such as Indra, who can give temporary things in small quantity, through actions filled with desire. ... They act in this way because (*hi*) in this world of men, the results of such actions come quickly.” (*Gīta Bhūṣaṇa* 4.12 commentary)

4.13: To gradually free people from selfish desire and elevate them to niṣkāma-karma, I created the four social divisions according to different qualities and activities (*cātur-varṇyam mayā sṛṣṭam guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ*). Although I create their different bodies (*tasya kartāram api mām*), the differences in their circumstances are not due to any

partiality on My part, because My attitude towards the living entities never changes (*viddhy akartāram avyayam*).

Explanatory note:

Śrīla Prabhupāda and Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa both explain that Kṛṣṇa creates the varṇas and āśramas to gradually elevate conditioned souls to the spiritual platform.

My Evidence:

“In two verses the Lord speaks of the cause of destroying the desire for enjoyment, which is an obstacle to performance of niṣkāma-karma.” (*Gīta Bhūṣaṇa* 4.13 commentary)

4.14: I get no karmic reactions for anything I do in creating, maintaining and destroying the universes (*na mām karmāṇi limpanti*). This is because I do not act with a desire to enjoy the results of My work (*na me karma-phale sprhā*). Those who truly understand this about Me will follow My example and thus also not become bound by karmic reactions (*iti mām yo 'bhijānāti ; karmabhir na sa badhyate*).

Explanatory note:

Both His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda and Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa explain that this verse confirms that nothing the Lord does implicates Him in karmic reactions because He is niṣkāma—He has no desire to enjoy the result of His work. In his translation of *Gīta Bhūṣaṇa*, H.H. Bhānu Swami writes a note explaining why one who understands this truth about Kṛṣṇa is not bound by karma.

My evidence:

“This verse elaborates the last. These actions such as creation do not contaminate Me with the fault of unfair dealings or desire, unlike the case of the jīva. This is because My acts of creation, maintenance and destruction are in response to the karmas of the jīva in his body, not to My needs. I have no desire for results in actions such as creation of the universe or creation of the bodies of the jīvas. Thus, I am not contaminated by the

acts of creation and destruction. He who acts with desire for results is contaminated by the results.” (*Gītā Bhūṣaṇa* 4.14 commentary)

“He who knows that the Lord is transcendental to the material world attains liberation. This is similar to verse 9. He should also follow the Lord’s example and perform work without desire.” (H.H. Bhānu Swami’s note to *Gītā Bhūṣaṇa* 4.14)

4.15: Knowing Me to have no materially motivated intentions, many great souls in the past, like Vivasvān, performed their prescribed duties as I instructed (*evam jñātvā kṛtām karma*). Those seeking liberation engaged in *niṣkāma-karma* to attain it, while those already liberated do so to set the right example for others (*pūrvair api mumukṣubhiḥ*). Therefore, Arjuna, whether you are liberated or not, you should follow the example of the great souls of the past by performing your prescribed duty (*kuru karmaiva tasmāt tvam pūrvaiḥ pūrva-tarām kṛtam*).

Explanatory note:

Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur says this refers to past liberated souls like King Janaka, who, following in Kṛṣṇa’s footsteps, continued to act in *niṣkāma-karma-yoga* simply to set a good example for others, even though he did not require to do so for his own liberation. Baladeva Vidyabhusana agrees with this, but adds an additional perspective. He says this also refers to conditioned souls in the past, like Vivasvān, who embraced Kṛṣṇa’s teachings on how to act in *niṣkāma-karma-yoga* and thus attained liberation. His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda’s purport also includes both perspectives.

My evidence:

“Understanding how I have acted without being bound, previous persons like Janaka performed karma in order to promote it among the people.” (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.15 commentary)

“Knowing Me thus (*evam*), previous persons desiring liberation (*pūrvair mumukṣubhiḥ*), My students such as Vivasvān, who followed the teaching, performed *niṣkāma-karma*. You also should indeed perform action, and not renounce action. If one is impure in

heart, one should perform these actions to purify the heart. This leads to *jñāna*. If one is already pure in heart, one should perform the action to teach others.” (*Gītā Bhūṣaṇa* 4.15 commentary)

Arjuna’s unspoken doubt: Why are You emphasising the importance of following in the footsteps of previous great souls in performing one’s prescribed duties? Is it possible to be confused about duty? Is that why one needs to look to the example of those who have previously attained perfection?

Explanatory note:

All three ācāryas agree that without looking at the example of those who have already succeeded, it is highly likely we will misunderstand what our prescribed duties are and how to execute them.

My evidence:

“First the difficulty in understanding karma is described.” (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.16 commentary)

“Is there some doubt about karma, since You speak with great insistence about acting as previous persons did, according to their predecessors?’ ‘Certainly there is. What type of action should be performed by those desiring liberation? And what is the *jñāna*, the opposite of action (*akarma*), included in the actions which they perform? Even those who are wise (*kavayaḥ*) have become bewildered about this (*atra*), because they are unable to discern the truth about it.” (*Gītā Bhūṣaṇa* 4.16 commentary)

4.16-19: Karmic and non-karmic work

4.16: Even great sages dedicated to Me sometimes become confused about which actions give karmic consequences, and which do not (*kim karma kim akarmeti kavayo ’py atra mohitāḥ*). Therefore, I will now explain to you everything you need to know about action—binding and non-binding (*tat te karma pravakṣyāmi*). By clearly understanding this, you will become free from the ill-fortune (*yaj jñātvā mokṣyase ’śubhāt*).

Explanatory note:

Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur says we should not act in imitation of others but understand correctly the different types of action. Baladeva Vidyabhusana explains that here ‘karma’ refers to action which gives karmic reactions, and *akarma* refers to actions which do not give karmic reactions. This is supported by His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda.

I have unpacked ‘kavayo’ as great sages dedicated to *Kṛṣṇa* based on *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* 7.19: *jñānavān mām prapadyate*.

My evidence:

“Moreover, action is not to be performed by the intelligent person just in an imitative way, but after having understood its varieties.” (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.16 commentary)

“What type of action should be performed by those desiring liberation? And what is the *jñāna*, the opposite of action (*akarma*), included in the action which they perform? Even those who are wise (*kavayaḥ*) have become bewildered about this (*atra*), because they are unable to discern the truth about it... Akarma here means ‘that which is different from or opposite to action.’” (*Gītā Bhūṣaṇa* 4.16 commentary)

“Akarma means without reaction to work.” (*Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* 4.18 purport)

Arjuna’s unspoken doubt: If even great sages become confused about action, what hope is there for me?

Explanatory note:

This transition between 4.16 and 4.17 is based on Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa’s commentary.

My evidence:

“But even the wise become bewildered about it (as You said in the previous verse), so how can I understand?” (*Gītā Bhūṣaṇa* 4.17 commentary)

4.17: One must understand the difference between materially pious and impious actions (*karmaṇo hy api boddhavyaṁ boddhavyaṁ ca vikarmaṇaḥ*), and actions that give no reaction whatsoever—neither pious nor impious (*akarmaṇaś ca boddhavyaṁ*). All this is extremely difficult to understand (*gahanā karmaṇo gatiḥ*) unless one follows the example of past liberated souls.

Explanatory note:

Both His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda and Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa stress the importance of associating with spiritual authorities to properly understand these topics.

My evidence:

“You should try to discern the true nature of these topics in the association of those who know the natures of these.’ It is hard to understand (*gahanā*) the workings of karma and akarma.” (*Gītā Bhūṣaṇa* 4.17 commentary)

4.18: One who knows how to work without accruing any karmic reactions, and also knows when renouncing work would bind him (*karmaṇy akarma yaḥ paśyed akarmaṇi ca karma yaḥ*) is spiritually intelligent and remains untouched by the modes of nature while performing all kinds of work (*sa buddhimān manuṣyeṣu sa yuktaḥ kṛtsna-karma-kṛt*).

Explanatory note:

Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur and His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda both explain that in this verse Kṛṣṇa says that performing niṣkāma-karma leads to no karmic bondage, but prematurely renouncing one’s duties while the heart is still contaminated by material desire is karmically binding.

My evidence:

“This verse gives an understanding of the truth of action and non-action. He is intelligent who sees that persons of pure heart fixed in knowledge like Janaka, who do not renounce activity, but rather engage in action, in niṣkāma-karma-yoga, do not accrue karma (akarma); and who sees that one who does not perform actions, renouncing actions as a sannyāsī, being of impure heart without knowledge, though

talking profusely of knowledge because of knowledge of scriptures, actually obtains bondage of karma leading to misery. He engages in all activities; he does not renounce action even through instructions or association of those who think themselves knowledgeable, talking a lot about jñāna.” (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.18 commentary)

4.19: One must come to the stage where all one’s actions are devoid of material desire (*yasya sarve samārambhāḥ kāma-saṅkalpa-varjitāḥ*). This is possible when one is completely purified of past karmic reactions by the cultivation of transcendental knowledge (*jñānāgni-dagdha-karmāṇam*). Only those who are already self-realised can recognise such a transcendently situated person (*tam āhuḥ paṇḍitaṁ budhāḥ*).

Explanatory note:

Both Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa and Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur explain that acting in niškāma-karma-yoga has the same effect as performing jñāna-yoga because niškāma-karma-yoga burns up all reactions to past work and reveals one’s spiritual nature. This is explained in verses 19–23.

Tam āhuḥ paṇḍitaṁ budhāḥ: None of the ācāryas comment directly on this line.

Therefore, I have relied on statements His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda makes elsewhere to unpack it.

My evidence:

“In five verses, the Lord speaks of karma as a form of jñāna. He, whose performance of all actions (*samārambhāḥ*) is devoid of expectation of desired results (*kāma-saṅkalpa-varjitāḥ*), who aims at realizing ātmā through his actions, is called a learned man (*paṇḍitam*), a knower of ātmā, by the wise (*budhāḥ*). Why is he called so? When his heart becomes pure by execution of desireless duties, then all his accumulated karmas will have been burned up by the fire of ātma-jñāna which has made its appearance.” (*Gītā Bhūṣaṇa* 4.19 commentary)

“Jñāna means one who knows that he is not this body; he's spirit soul. Ahaṁ brahmāsmi. So when one is freed from the bodily concept of life, he's called jñānī....

Jñānī means paṇḍita.” ([Lecture on Bhagavad-gītā 2.13, on November 19th, 1972, in Hyderabad](#))

“The symptoms of highly developed devotional service for Kṛṣṇa, which are exhibited by the pure devotees, are sometimes imitated by those who are not actually pure devotees. ... Sometimes those who are not conversant with the science of devotional service are captivated by the exhibition of such symptoms, but learned devotees know that they are simply imitation.” (*Teachings of Lord Caitanya*, Chapter 14)

4.20 - 24: The perfect buddhi yogi

4.20: By engaging in niṣkāma-karma (*tyaktvā karma-phalāsaṅgam*), one attains brahma-bhūta—the first stage of transcendental realisation. At this point, one feels inner satisfaction and no longer needs anything external for happiness (*nitya-tṛpto nirāśrayaḥ*). Whatever one then does—whether apparently pious or impious (*karmaṇy abhipravṛtto 'pi*)—is done without selfish material desire and thus gives no karmic reactions (*naiva kiñcit karoti saḥ*).

Explanatory note:

Tyaktvā karma-phalāsaṅgam: I have unpacked this as referring to niṣkāma-karma.

Nitya-tṛpto nirāśrayaḥ: I have explained this as a reference to the brahma-bhūta stage mentioned in *Bhagavad-gītā* 18.54.

Although not stated directly, I believe these interpretations are supported by the ācāryas' commentaries to this verse.

Karmaṇy abhipravṛtto 'pi: Based on Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura's discussion in the previous verse, I have unpacked this as referring to both conventionally accepted pious and impious work.

My evidence:

“This person is always satisfied by his own bliss (*nitya-tṛptaḥ*). He does not take shelter at all of anything for his livelihood (*nirāśrayaḥ*).” (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.20 commentary)

“Having given up attachment to the results of work, satisfied with constant realization of ātmā to be accomplished in the future, devoid of taking shelter of anything even for livelihood, a person so qualified, though engaged in actions, does nothing at all.” (*Gītā-bhūṣaṇa* 4.20 commentary)

“One who completely engages in activity (*samārambha*) devoid of desires to attain objects of enjoyment performs actions consumed by the fire of knowledge, whether the actions are prescribed (*karma*) or forbidden (*vikarma*). Just as the qualified person sees *karma* as not leading to bondage, he also sees *vikarma*, or forbidden action, as not accruing bondage.” (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.19 commentary)

4.21: Once having attained the transcendental platform of *brahma-bhūta*, one no longer needs to practice acting without desire for the result. At this point, one’s mind is truly devoid of any selfish desire, and one spontaneously thinks of how to satisfy the Lord (*nirāśīr yata-cittātmā*). Such a transcendentalist does not think of anything as belonging to himself. He works to attain the basic necessities to live a healthy life, but he does not over-endeavour (*tyakta-sarva-parigrahaḥ*). Thus, even while working only for bodily requirements (*śārīram kevalam karma*), he does not incur any karmic reactions (*kurvan nāpnoti kilbiṣam*).

Explanatory note:

Since one must engage in *niṣkāma-karma* to attain the transcendental platform, I have tried to show the distinction between the practice of *niṣkāma-karma* and the state of *nirāśīḥ*—a condition of genuine freedom from material desire.

4.22: In other words, he is satisfied with whatever comes naturally by the Lord’s arrangement (*yadṛcchā-lābha-santuṣṭo*). Since he genuinely has no material desires, he remains peaceful in all conditions: heat or cold, happiness or distress. He neither envies those more successful than himself nor hates those who try to harm him (*dvandvātīto vimatsarah*). He is neither elated in the face of success nor upset when he fails but continues to serve the Lord to the best of his ability in both circumstances

(*samaḥ siddhāv asiddhau ca*). Such a transcendentalist is never bound by karmic reactions, although fully engaged in different activities (*kṛtvāpi na nibadhyate*).

Explanatory notes:

Dvandvātīto: Śrīla Prabhupāda and Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa give examples of dualities such as heat and cold, happiness and distress.

Vimatsaraḥ: Śrīla Prabhupāda translates this as “envy,” suggesting freedom from resentment toward those more successful than oneself. Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa explains it as freedom from hatred toward those who try to harm one. I have tried to incorporate both perspectives.

My evidence:

“He is tolerant (*atītaḥ*) of dualities such as heat and cold. He does not have hatred toward those who attack him (*vimatsaraḥ*).” (*Gītā-bhūṣaṇa* 4.22 commentary)

4.23: All karmic reactions are destroyed (*samagram̐ pravilīyate*) for one who is neither attracted nor averse to anything in the material world (*gata-saṅgasya muktasya*). Having realised his spiritual nature (*jñānāvasthita-cetasah*), such a person performs all actions as a sacrifice for Viṣṇu (*yajñāyācarataḥ karma*).

Explanatory note:

Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa explains that this verse describes the four traits of a liberated person acting on the transcendental platform: he works without material attachment; he has neither attraction nor repulsion toward anything in the material world; he has realised his spiritual nature (*brahma-bhūta*); and he does everything as a sacrifice for Viṣṇu.

My evidence:

“For the person who is *niṣkāma* (*gata-saṅgasya*), devoid of attraction and repulsion (*muktasya*), whose mind is absorbed in knowledge of his own *ātmā*, and who performs those actions while thinking that they are for the pleasure of Viṣṇu (*yajñāya*), all previous karmas, causes of bondage, are destroyed.” (*Gītā-bhūṣaṇa* 4.23 commentary)

4.24: Consider the example of a person performing a daily fire yajña. Even this daily duty can become completely spiritualised; the same principle applies to all prescribed work. When one’s mind is fully absorbed in transcendental knowledge—in the knowledge that Viṣṇu is everything and everything is His energy (*brahma-karma-samādhinā*)—then when such a person performs his daily fire yajña, he sees everything differently from a materialist performing the same yajña. He sees that everything he is doing, the words or mantras he needs to say to execute his task, the equipment he needs for the yajña, the immediate recipient of his efforts, and the deity or person whom he is trying to please—all of this, being Viṣṇu’s energy, is of the same spiritual quality as the Lord (*brahmārpaṇam brahma havir*). By performing this daily task with this spiritual vision (*brahmāgnau brahmaṇā hutam*), one gradually attains full spiritual realisation (*brahmaiva tena gantavyam*).

Explanatory note:

Śrīla Prabhupāda explains the general principle of how work done as a sacrifice for Viṣṇu liberates one from karmic reactions. Kṛṣṇa uses the example of a fire sacrifice because, in Vedic times, this was part of many people’s daily routine.

Arpaṇam: Śrīla Prabhupāda refers to this as anything done as an offering for the Lord. Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa explains that it includes the instruments used in the offering, the immediate recipient of the offering, the mantras recited during the offering, and the presiding deity overseeing the sacrifice.

My evidence:

“Having explained that performing prescribed activities (*karma*) takes on the form of *jñāna* by including in them the quest for the distinctive *jīvātmā*, the Lord now describes how an action, along with its components, takes on the form of *jñāna* by searching out the Supreme Ātmā, the Lord. *Arpaṇam* means the instrument by which something is offered, or the person to whom something is offered. It refers to the *sruva* or other ladles. It can also refer to mantras and to presiding deities like Indra. These are all Brahman (the Lord) alone.” (*Gītā-bhūṣaṇa* 4.24 commentary)

“So this fire worship is recommended in Vedic literature. So grhasthas, or the householders, they are expected to offer, I mean to say, sacrifice in the fire daily.”
([Lecture on Bhagavad-gītā 6.1–4, on September 2nd, 1966, in New York](#))

4.25: Other goals pursued through sacrifice

4.25: Some seek fulfilment by worshipping the demigods and carefully performing fire sacrifices to attain material benefits (*daivam evāpare yajñam*). Others perform the same sacrifice to end material suffering by annihilating their personhood and merging into the impersonal Brahman (*brahmāgnāv apare yajñam yajñenaivopajuhvati*). Both types of worshippers mistake their respective goals—material enjoyment and the end of suffering—for ultimate perfection. All prescribed duties can similarly be performed to pursue material enjoyment or to escape material suffering.

Explanatory note:

Daivam evāpare yajñam: Trying to satisfy any influential person with the motive of securing some benefit falls into this category of demigod worship.

Yoginaḥ: A yogī is one who seeks to connect with the Absolute Truth or Perfection. However, in this context, I understand Kṛṣṇa to be using the term broadly to include misconceptions of what constitutes ultimate perfection. Materialists who seek material gain and enjoyment mistake this for perfect fulfilment. Impersonalists who simply want to end their suffering at all costs mistake this for perfection.

My evidence:

“I worship some friend or some big man, I have got some motive, that ‘This big man is a very big businessman, and if I can please him then he may give me some business, I’ll derive some profit.’ So the worship of demigods is like that. They worship different demigods for some particular purpose.” (Lecture on Bhagavad-gītā 6.35–45, February 20, 1969, Los Angeles)

“Just like a diseased man ... he’s thinking of committing suicide: ‘Oh, this life is very intolerable. Let me commit suicide.’ So in desperate condition sometimes the philosophy of voidism, impersonalism is followed, to make things zero. Because this life

is so troublesome, sometimes one commits suicide to get out of this troublesome material existence. So the philosophy of voidism, impersonalism is like that ... So the negative way, to make it zero. That is void philosophy.” ([Lecture on Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.8.32, April 24, 1973, Los Angeles](#))

4.26: Buddhi-yoga in different āśramas

4.26: Before speaking about the perfected buddhi-yogī, I was explaining the process of niṣkāma-karma that leads to such perfection. Let us now return to that discussion and consider the respective means by which lifelong celibates and married people can achieve spiritual perfection.

Lifelong celibates must ensure they hear only spiritual subject matters and strictly refrain from all other forms of sense enjoyment (*śrotrādīnīndriyāṇy anye saṁyamāgniṣu juhvati*). Married people may engage in some regulated sense gratification while recognising that this is not the path to true happiness and simultaneously practising spiritual disciplines that gradually free them from all attachment to material enjoyment (*śabdādīn viṣayān anye indriyāgniṣu juhvati*).

Explanatory note:

Earlier in this chapter, in verses 18–19, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that one must understand which actions purify the consciousness and liberate one from material bondage. Then, in verses 20–24, He describes the symptoms of liberated souls who work in this world with fully purified consciousness. In verse 25, He describes those who fail to attain liberation despite performing similar activities. Now, in verse 26, He returns to the topic introduced in verses 18–19 and continues describing the practices of those striving for spiritual perfection.

In this verse, Kṛṣṇa describes two legitimate approaches to sense control. Lifelong celibates completely refrain from sense enjoyment by hearing only spiritual topics, whereas married practitioners are permitted regulated enjoyment while simultaneously cultivating spiritual knowledge.

4.27–29: Other systems of yoga

4.27: Besides buddhi-yoga there are other authorised methods for freeing oneself from material attachment and aversion and thus attaining the transcendental platform. The followers of Patañjali yoga attempt to control the senses (*sarvāñīndriya-karmāṇi*) and life airs (*prāṇa-karmāṇi cāpare*) through mental discipline (*ātma-sam̐yama-yogāgnau*) acquired by the cultivation of transcendental knowledge (*jñāna-dīpīte*).

Explanatory note:

Kṛṣṇa begins Chapter Four by explaining that He had previously taught this knowledge of buddhi-yoga—which is niṣkāma-karma sustained by the practice of regulated devotional service—to the sun-god. Thus far in this chapter, with the exception of verse 25, Kṛṣṇa has been describing the practices of the buddhi-yogī. Now, from verses 27–29, He briefly mentions other types of yogīs who strive for transcendental realisation.

Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa explains that this yoga system depends upon resolute mental discipline to restrain the senses and life airs. Such determination is sustained through the cultivation of transcendental knowledge.

My evidence:

“Others offer the activities of the senses and prāṇas into the yoga of the controlled mind (*ātma*), thought of as a fire. With the mind, they attempt to destroy the tendency for activities of the senses and prāṇas.” (*Gītā-bhūṣaṇa* 4.26 commentary)

4.28: Besides the followers of Patañjali yoga, there are others who practise different variations of mystic yoga—such as haṭha-yoga and aṣṭāṅga-yoga—to achieve different types of mystic perfection (*yoga-yajñās tathāpare*). Still others seek either elevation to the heavenly planets or merging with the impersonal Brahman through practices such as giving charity (*dravya-yajñās*), performing severe austerities (*tapo-yajñāḥ*), or cultivating transcendental knowledge through the study of Vedic literature (*svādhyāya-jñāna-yajñāś ca*).

4.29: There are those who focus on controlling the mind by practising different breathing techniques (*apāne juhvati prāṇam prāṇe 'pānaṁ tathāpare prāṇāpāna-gatī ruddhvā*), and some severely restrict their eating, thereby gradually sacrificing their lives (*apare niyatāhārāḥ prāṇān prāṇeṣu juhvati*).

Explanatory note:

Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura explains that the yogīs who restrict their food do so with the intention of giving up their bodies.

My evidence:

“Some yogis curtail eating and sacrifice their very life.” (Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura’s commentary on *Śrīmad Bhagavad-gītā* 4.29; translated by Bhūmipati dāsa; published by Rasbihari Lal & Sons)

4.30 - 33: Purpose of Sacrifice

4.30: All these different paths are intended to help one control the senses (*sarve 'py ete yajña-vidah*). One who practises them with this intention becomes purified of past karmic reactions (*yajña-kṣapita-kalmaṣāḥ*), while also attaining the by-products of sacrifice: material facilities and power (*yajña-śiṣṭāmṛta-bhujah*). Then, on leaving the body, one attains the eternal spiritual realm (*yānti brahma sanātanam*).

Explanatory note:

Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura and Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa explain that this verse describes both the primary and secondary results of sacrifice. The primary purpose of sacrifice is to control the senses and thereby become purified of the reactions to past sins. In this way, one gradually attains transcendental realisation. The secondary result of sacrifice is the attainment of material enjoyment and power.

My evidence:

“These knowers of yajña, who all desire to conquer the senses (*yajña-vidah*), by practising the previously described sacrifices, destroyed their sins by these sacrifices. The secondary results are described: they enjoy the nectar of the remnants of sacrifice such as food and the attainment of enjoyment and power. The main results are then

described: as stated previously, by the perfection of jñāna, they finally attain Brahman.”
(*Gītā-bhūṣaṇa* 4.30 commentary)

4.31: However, those who do not engage in any type of authorised sacrifice cannot be happy in this world (nāyaṁ loko ’sty ayajñasya), what to speak of attaining a better destination in the next life, O best of the Kurus (kuto ’nyaḥ kuru-sattama).

4.32: These many different types of sacrifice described in the Vedas (*evam̐ bahu-vidhā yajñāḥ vitatā brahmaṇo mukhe*) correspond to one’s prescribed duties, which differ according to one’s *varṇa* and *āśrama* (*karma-jān viddhi tān sarvān*). By understanding and performing the duties appropriate to one’s situation, one will achieve liberation (*evam̐ jñātvā vimokṣyase*).

4.33: More important than the external acts of sacrifice, such as execution of occupational duties, fasting, and giving in charity (*śreyān dravya-mayād yajñāḥ*), are those practices by which one cultivates transcendental knowledge (*jñāna-yajñāḥ parantaṭapa*). After all, Arjuna, the purpose of doing sacrifice is to realise transcendental knowledge (*sarvaṁ karmākhilam̐ pārtha jñāne parisamāpyate*).

Explanatory note:

Baladeva explains that there are two aspects to prescribed duties. One aspect is cultivating transcendental knowledge, and the other is acting on that knowledge. Of the two, the cultivation of transcendental knowledge is more important. This is because prescribed duties performed with proper knowledge produce the desired result: freedom from the influence of the modes of nature and attainment of self-realisation.

This echoes Kṛṣṇa’s instruction in Bhagavad-gītā 8.7: *mām anusmara yudhya ca*—“always think of Me in the form of Kṛṣṇa and at the same time carry out your prescribed duty of fighting.” Thinking of Kṛṣṇa (*Kṛṣṇa-smaraṇam*) is the fruit of *śravaṇam* and *kīrtanam*. Without *śravaṇam* and *kīrtanam*, *Viṣṇoḥ smaraṇam* is not possible. This aspect of our prescribed duties is more important than the external work itself.

My evidence:

“In the action having two forms, the *jñāna* portion of the sacrifice is considered better than the gross portion consisting of action (*dravya-mayād*). *Dravya-maya*, meaning composed of material elements such as giving charity, stands for all the external methods mentioned, such as sense control and starving the *prāṇas*. The Lord further explains. When *jñāna* appears, all *karmas* with their parts (*aṅgas*) disappear. This is stated because it is known that a *sādhana* (action to attain the goal) disappears with attainment of the goal (*jñāna*).” (*Gītā-bhūṣaṇa* 4.33 commentary)

“Without hearing sufficiently and properly, no one can make any progress by any of the methods of practice.” (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 2.2.36 purport)

4.34 -38: transcendental knowledge

4.34: The proper method for cultivating transcendental knowledge is to approach someone who has mastered the spiritual science and thereby attained self-realisation (*tad viddhi praṇipātena*). One must make it a priority to hear from him and ask thoughtful questions that help one assimilate the subject matter (*paripraśnena sevayā*). Since such souls have transcended the influence of the modes of material nature and realised transcendental bliss, they are extremely compassionate and will surely teach the spiritual aspirant whatever he needs to understand to achieve success (*upadekṣyanti te jñānaṁ jñāninas tattva-darśinaḥ*).

Explanatory note:

Many aspiring transcendentalists think this verse teaches that one must accept formal initiation from someone who is authorised to be an initiating spiritual master. However, this is a misconception on two counts.

The first is that the verse instructs one to respectfully approach (*praṇipātena*) those who have seen the truth. Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa translates *praṇipātena* as one should associate with those who have realised the truth. In *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda repeatedly equates both associating with realised devotees and serving them with hearing from them.

The second misconception concerns what is meant by “spiritual master”. Many new aspirants assume this means someone who has formally initiated disciples. However, the verse is referring to one who has attained mastery of the spiritual science by correctly understanding and successfully applying its teachings. In other words, he is a *tattva-darśinaḥ*—one who has seen the truth. The characteristics of such a self-realised soul are listed in *Bhagavad-gītā* 18.54: they are free from material hankering and lamentation, they see all living entities equally, and they are naturally blissful.

In this rendering I have said that one should make it a priority to hear from and thoughtfully question a self-realised transcendentalist. My reason for doing so is that in *Bhagavad-gītā* 4.33, Kṛṣṇa explains that the practices by which one cultivates transcendental knowledge are more important than the external performance of prescribed duties. This suggests to me that they should be given priority.

My evidence:

“To attain this knowledge a person must take association with devotees. ... These men with knowledge, who understand their own *ātmā* and the Supreme *Ātmā*, seeing your desire to know, indicated through your obeisances, questions and service, will teach such a person as you that knowledge of the Lord, for having seen the truth (*tattva-darśinaḥ*), they are merciful and preach that knowledge.” (*Gītā-bhūṣaṇa* 4.34 commentary)

“The first is association with devotees (hearing)...” (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 2.9.31 purport)

“One should therefore give up the association of materialistic persons and seek the association of persons engaged in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, and by such association he will benefit in spiritual advancement. By their words and instructions, he will be able to cut off his attachment to material existence.” (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 3.25.24 purport)

“One should take shelter of a pure devotee, who has nothing to do with this material world but is simply engaged in devotional service. By serving him only, one can transcend the qualitative material condition. In this verse it is recommended (*yogeśvara-upāsanayā*) that one serve the lotus feet of the topmost yogī, or the devotee. To serve the topmost devotee means to hear from him about the glories of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. To hear the glories of the Supreme Personality of Godhead from

the mouth of a pure devotee is to acquire a pious life.” (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 4.22.22 purport)

4.35: Once one properly understands this transcendental knowledge, Arjuna, one will never again confuse living beings with their temporary material bodies, nor be deluded into thinking that anyone can be killed (*yaj jñātvā na punar moham evaṁ yāsyasi pāṇḍava*). When one understands that every living being is an eternal part and parcel of the Supreme Lord, and that even their material bodies are products of the Lord's energy, one will see the relationship of every being with oneself and with Me (*yena bhūtāny aśeṣāṇi drakṣyasi ātmany atho mayi*).

Explanatory note:

This verse explains the result of attaining transcendental knowledge. His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda explains that we will see every living being as Kṛṣṇa's fragmental part and, in that sense, not different from Him. Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur explains that we will realise that we are not the material body, but the eternal soul. Baladeva Vidyabhusana adds that we will also see that even material bodies are connected to the Lord, being products of His energy.

My evidence:

“The result of knowledge is described in three and a half verses. Understanding that you are not the body but the soul, you will not have bewilderment, which is the quality of the mind.” (*Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* 4.35 commentary)

“By this knowledge you will see all bodies of men and devas (*bhūtāni aśeṣeṇa*) actually situated separately as jīvas with material identification (*upādhi*). And you will see those bodies situated in Me, the Lord of all, the cause of everything, as they are My products.” (*Gīta Bhusana* 4.35 commentary)

4.36: Even one who has led a sinful life and become habituated to the most sinful practices can become purified by cultivating transcendental knowledge (*api ced asi pāpebhyaḥ sarvebhyaḥ pāpa-kṛt-tamaḥ*). By transcendental knowledge one can both

eradicate the suffering arising from previous sins and overcome the tendency to commit further sins, thereby avoiding future suffering as well (*sarvaṁ jñāna-plavenaiva vṛjinaṁ santariṣyasi*).

Explanatory note:

Having described the result of transcendental knowledge in the previous verse, Kṛṣṇa now emphasises its extraordinary power. One should not think that such knowledge is attainable only by the pure and saintly. Even a person who has led a deeply sinful life and become habituated to the most sinful practices can become purified by cultivating transcendental knowledge.

Vṛjinaṁ: His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda translates this word as “miseries,” whereas Baladeva Vidyabhusana and Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur translate it as “sins.” This suggests that the verse encompasses both sin and the misery that results from it. The implication is that one who possesses transcendental knowledge neither commits sinful acts nor suffers from the reactions of previous sins.

Evidence:

“This verse speaks of the power of knowledge. Even if you are the most sinful among all sinful persons, you will cross over all sins (*vṛjinaṁ*), compared to an ocean because the sins are difficult to overcome, by the boat of knowledge just mentioned.” (*Gita Bhusana* 4.36 commentary)

“Actually, it is not possible for one who has attained knowledge to commit sinful acts.” (*Sarartha-varsini-tika* 4.36 commentary)

“There are many results of past sinful activities for which we are suffering at the present moment, and we may be suffering in the future due to our present sinful activities. But all of these reactions to sinful deeds can immediately be stopped if we take to Kṛṣṇa consciousness.” (*Nectar of Devotion*, Chapter 1)

4.37: Arjuna, think of transcendental knowledge as a blazing fire which reduces firewood to ashes (*yathaidhāṁsi samiddho ’gnir bhasma-sāt kurute ’rjuna*), for it burns away one's accumulated reserve of karmic reactions. It destroys not only one's current

material tendencies, but also dormant tendencies that have not yet surfaced, whether pious or sinful (*jñānāgniḥ sarva-karmāṇi bhasma-sāt kurute tathā*).

Explanatory note:

All the ācāryas explain that this verse is not merely speaking about the destruction of sinful reactions, as was the case in the previous verse. Here, Kṛṣṇa says that transcendental knowledge destroys all reactions, both sinful and pious.

His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda describes different stages of karmic reactions: reaction in the making, reaction fructifying, and reaction already achieved. Reaction in the making refers to karmic reactions we are creating by our current behaviour. Reaction fructifying refers to seeds of tendencies that are developing within the heart but have not yet been translated into behaviour. Transcendental knowledge ensures that we neither act sinfully nor piously, but always in the Lord's transcendental service. It also ensures that we never develop the inclination to act sinfully or piously, but remain committed to the Lord's service throughout our lives.

Reaction already achieved refers to the fortunes and misfortunes we are currently experiencing and is technically known as *prārabdha* karma. Śrīla Prabhupāda says that these too are destroyed.

Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur, on the other hand, explains that *prārabdha* karma is not destroyed. In other words, we should not think that if we were born with a birth defect, cultivating transcendental knowledge will miraculously cure that defect.

Baladeva Vidyabhusana helps us understand the sense in which both Śrīla Prabhupāda's and Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur's perspectives are true. He explains that transcendental knowledge does not eradicate the karmic reactions we are currently experiencing, but it does mitigate the suffering arising from sinful reactions.

I have not mentioned that transcendental knowledge can mitigate current suffering, as that is a theme Kṛṣṇa will address directly in Bhagavad-gītā 6.17.

Evidence:

“Knowledge arising from purity of heart destroys all karmas except the *prārabdha* karmas.” (*Sarartha-varsini-tika* 4.37 commentary)

Bhanu Swami's footnote to the above: “*Prārabdha* karmas are those which are being experienced in this life.”

“It has just been said that sinful reactions are destroyed by *brahma-vidyā* (knowledge of the Lord and *ātma*). Now this verse says that all karmas, even *punya-karmas*, are destroyed by *brahma-vidyā*. That knowledge burns up all accumulated past karmas except the *prārabdha-karmas*. And that knowledge also transforms the actions performed in the present life, making them like drops of water rolling off a lotus leaf—having no reaction. Though the *prārabdha-karmas* are extremely weakened by the influence of this knowledge, they are still situated in the person with realization of *ātma*, by the will of the Lord...” (*Gita Bhusana* 4.37 commentary)

“So pious activities cannot be compared with transcendental activities.” ([Morning walk, on October 3rd, 1975, in Mauritius](#))

“The cause is diagnosed by Vedic Acaryas as the *pāpa-bīja*, or the seed of sinful activities. This *pāpa-bīja* remains dormant within our heart in three stages—dormant, seedling, and fructified. This chain of different stages of our *pāpa-bīja* is the cause of repeated birth and death transmigration in different species of life.” ([Letter to Dr. R. N. Vyasa, June 7th, 1970](#))

4.38: Nothing can purify one from material conditioning as effectively as cultivating transcendental knowledge (*na hi jñānena sadṛśaṁ pavitram iha vidyate*). As one practises and gradually perfects buddhi yoga, this knowledge manifests within the heart in due course of time (*tat svayam yoga-sāmsiddhaḥ kālenātmani vindati*), without the need to externally renounce the world.

Explanatory note:

Both Baladeva Vidyabhusana and Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur explain that nothing is as effective as transcendental knowledge for purifying the consciousness—not austerity, pilgrimage, or any other practice. Practitioners of these other processes

cannot easily attain transcendental knowledge, but *buddhi-yoga* always culminates in success.

Transcendental knowledge purifies slowly but surely, and manifests in the heart in due course of time. One does not need to accept the *sannyāsa-āśrama* for this process to succeed.

Evidence:

“In this world, among those who engage in austerities, yoga and other processes, there is nothing to compare to knowledge. That knowledge is not easily attained by everyone, but is fully attained (*saṁsiddha*) by practising *niṣkāma-karma-yoga*. It is not unobtainable, but is attained in time, not immediately. That knowledge is attained spontaneously within the self (*ātmani*), not by accepting external *sannyāsa*.” (*Sarartha-varsini-tika* 4.38 commentary)

“Because (*hi*) nothing (such as going to holy places or austerities) purifies as much as knowledge. This knowledge is attained through the maturation of *niṣkāma-karma-yoga* (*yoga-saṁsiddha*), after some time (*kālena*), not immediately. And it is realized in the *ātmā* (*ātmani*), of its own accord (*svayam*), not by just accepting *sannyāsa* or other external means.” (*Gita Bhusana* 4.38 commentary)

4.39–40: Who does and does not realise transcendental knowledge

Arjuna’s unspoken doubt: “How and when does transcendental knowledge awaken in the heart?”

Explanatory note:

This transition between 4.38 and 4.39 was borrowed from Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur.

Evidence:

“How and when does this happen?” (*Sarartha-varsini-tika* 4.39 commentary)

4.39: To attain transcendental knowledge, one must possess the following qualities. One must have faith in Kṛṣṇa and the process of *buddhi-yoga* (*śraddhāvān labhate jñānam*). By determinedly engaging in these practices, especially *śravaṇam* and *kīrtanam*, one attains complete control over the senses (*tat-paraḥ saṁyatendriyaḥ*). Having achieved sense control, one will quickly realise the soul and its relationship with the Supreme and by thus attaining liberation, experience unadulterated peace (*jñānam labdhvā parāṁ śāntim acireṇādhighacchati*).

Explanatory note:

All three ācāryas agree that the successful transcendentalist possesses three attributes. First, one must have faith that Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme Personality of Godhead and that engaging in the practices of *bhakti-yoga*—especially *śravaṇam* and *kīrtanam*—will result in the highest perfection. Secondly, one must achieve steadiness in the practices of bhakti. Thirdly, one must successfully control the senses.

Evidence:

“One who has strong faith that this knowledge will arise from purification of the heart through *niṣkāma-karma* (*śraddhāvān*), one who is steady in this performance (*tat-paraḥ*), and one who, moreover, attains control of his senses (*saṁyatendriyaḥ*), attains this knowledge. At that time, he attains liberation (*parāṁ śāntim*).” (*Gīta Bhusana* 4.39 commentary)

“When we speak of hearing and chanting, it means that not only should one chant and hear of the holy name of the Lord as Rāma, Kṛṣṇa (or systematically the sixteen names Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare/ Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare), but one should also read and hear the *Bhagavad-gītā* and *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* in the association of devotees. The primary practice of *bhakti-yoga* will cause the seed already sown in the heart to sprout, and by a regular watering process, as mentioned above, the *bhakti-yoga* creeper will begin to grow.” (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 2.2.30 purport)***

4.40: Now I will describe the three types of people who are not eligible for transcendental knowledge. The first are ignorant people who have not read or tried to understand scripture, especially this divine conversation of Ours. The second is the person who is familiar with scripture but has no faith in it (*ajñāś cāśraddadhānaś ca*). Such faithlessness could be due to one's own argumentative nature or due to frustration on seeing that there are many factions with differing opinions.

The third is the person who knows and has faith in scripture but doubts his own ability to ever attain perfection. The life of this third person is especially ruined (*saṁśayātmā vinaśyati*). Due to his doubts about the possibility of his own success, his mind is never peaceful (*na sukhaṁ saṁśayātmanaḥ*). He can neither enjoy material happiness nor attain transcendental happiness (*nāyaṁ loko 'sti na paro*).

Explanatory note:

According to Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur and Baladeva Vidyabhusana, this verse speaks about three types of people who are not eligible for transcendental knowledge:

1. The ignorant (*ajñāḥ*), who have no knowledge of scriptural teachings.
2. The faithless (*aśraddadhānaḥ*), who know the scriptures and can even cite them, but have no faith in them.
3. The doubting (*saṁśayātmā*), who know the scriptures and have faith in them, but do not believe they can personally attain perfection.

Both ācāryas explain that Kṛṣṇa especially criticises the third person. Baladeva Vidyabhusana explains that this is because the doubting person neither enjoys material happiness nor attains spiritual happiness.

His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda appears to merge the second and third categories into one broader category of faithless people. He describes such people as those who know scripture but have no faith in it, those who accept scripture but do not accept Kṛṣṇa, and those who lack faith in God and revelation.

In this rendition, I have followed Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur and Baladeva Vidyabhusana's threefold division. However, I have adopted from His Divine Grace A. C.

Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda's purport the emphasis that the most important scripture one must know is the *Bhagavad-gītā*.

Evidence:

“Having spoken of the person who was qualified with knowledge, in this verse Kṛṣṇa speaks of the person without qualification for knowledge. That person perishes who is ignorant like an animal or who, though knowing the scriptures, does not believe in anything because of seeing the arguments between various factions (*aśraddadhānaḥ*), or who, though even having faith, is afflicted with doubt whether he can attain the goal. Among these persons (ignorant, faithless, and doubting), the doubting one is especially criticised in the last line.” (*Sarartha-varsini-tika* 4.40 commentary)

“Having described those qualified for knowledge and the results, the Lord now describes the unqualified person and the result for that person. The ignorant person, like an animal, with no knowledge of scriptures; or the person who, in spite of having knowledge of scriptures, has no faith, since he has a quarrelsome nature; or the person who, in spite of having faith, doubts he can attain perfection—this person is destroyed. This means he deviates from his own interest. Among these persons, the one with doubts is especially criticised. This doubtful person does not have happiness derived from the gross world or the next world.” (*Gita Bhusana* 4.40 commentary)

4.41–42: The conclusion of Chapter 4

4.41: Arjuna, a self-realised person incurs no karmic reactions (*ātmavantam na karmāṇi nibadhnanti dhanañjaya*) because he renounces all materially motivated work through the practice of yoga (*yoga-sannyasta-karmāṇam*) and vanquishes all doubts by cultivating knowledge of My teachings (*jñāna-sañchinna-saṁśayam*).

Explanatory note:

All the ācāryas agree that this verse explains that by cultivating knowledge of *Bhagavad-gītā* one's doubts will be vanquished.

Please note that Arjuna misunderstands this line of the verse: *yoga-sannyasta-karmāṇam*. Hearing *sannyasta karmanam* he thinks *Kṛṣṇa* means by executing yoga one

renounces action itself. What Kṛṣṇa actually means is he renounces materially motivated action, in other words he performs only *niskama karma*. This will be made more clear in the next chapter.

My evidence:

“Actions do not bind that person who has renounced all actions by yoga. This means that the actions have become *jnana*, being executed without attachment, by *niskama-karma-yoga*, expressed by words like *yoga-stha kuru karmāṇi*: perform your duty with composure, O Arjuna, abandoning all attachment to success or failure (*Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* 2.48). Actions do not bind the person who has vanquished all doubts by the knowledge spoken by Me and who is seeing the *ātma (ātmavantam)*. The actions do not bind because they have been destroyed by that knowledge.” (*Gītā Bhūṣaṇa* 4.41 commentary)

4.42: This is the conclusive difference between action that carries karmic reactions and action that does not. Therefore, to perform action without karmic reactions, one must destroy all doubts that are buried in the heart through knowledge of My teachings (*tasmād ajñāna-sambhūtaṁ hṛt-sthaṁ jñānāsinātmanaḥ*). Once you have destroyed these doubts, Arjuna, you must rise and determinedly engage in the battle (*chittvainam samśayaṁ yogam ātiṣṭhottīṣṭha bhārata*).

Explanatory note:

Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur and Baladeva Vidyabhusana explain that Kṛṣṇa now concludes that Arjuna should vanquish his doubts through transcendental knowledge. He will then be able to rise to the occasion and perform his duty without material attachment—*niṣkāma karma*. Baladeva Vidyabhusana further explains that the point of this chapter is that the cultivation of transcendental knowledge is primary and *niṣkāma karma* is secondary. This is because without transcendental knowledge, one cannot properly engage in *niṣkāma karma*.

In *Bhagavad-gītā* 4.17, Kṛṣṇa explains that to attain liberation one must understand the difference between work that binds one and work that liberates one. He now concludes that this understanding is attained through the cultivation of transcendental knowledge.

Evidence:

“With the sword of knowledge taught by Me, cut the doubt in the heart concerning the ātmā, and perform *niṣkāma-karma* as taught by Me (*yogam*). For that purpose, stand up. Karma, or action, has two parts, like grain with its husk. As the rice is superior to the husk, *jñāna* is superior to the gross part. That is the conclusion of the fourth chapter.” (*Gita Bhusana* 4.42 commentary)

“This verse concludes. Cutting the doubts situated in the heart, taking shelter of *niṣkāma-karma-yoga*, rise up in order to fight the battle.” (*Sarartha-varsini-tika* 4.42 commentary)

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 explains the history and process of buddhi-yoga. Kṛṣṇa reveals that this eternal science was originally taught to the sun god, gradually became lost, and is now being spoken again to Arjuna. He then explains the transcendental nature of His appearances and the benefits of understanding them. Returning to the subject of prescribed duty, He clarifies how one may perform action without incurring karmic reactions through sacrifice—especially *niṣkāma-karma* informed by transcendental knowledge. The chapter concludes by explaining the psychology of success and failure in self-realisation, and the crucial role of transcendental knowledge.

Along the way, Kṛṣṇa touches on *varṇāśrama* as a means of elevating those not yet interested in self-realisation, the need to follow the example of previously perfected souls, and the importance of taking guidance from a self-realised teacher.