

HELSINKI, MAY 28, 1913

IT is more than a year since I was able to speak here³⁷ about those things that rest so deeply in our hearts, things that we believe must enter more and more into human knowledge. From our time onward, the human soul will feel increasingly that these thoughts belong to its requirements, to its deepest longings. And it is with great pleasure that I greet you in this place for the second time, along with all those who have traveled here in order to show in your midst that their hearts and souls are connected to our sacred work the whole world over.

The last time I was able to speak to you here, we let our spiritual gaze journey far into the wide regions of the universe. This time our task will keep us more in the regions of earthly evolution. Our thoughts will nonetheless penetrate to regions that lead us to the gateway of the eternal manifestation of the spiritual in the world. We shall speak about a subject that apparently leads us far away in time and in space from the here and now. It will not on that account lead us any less to what lives in the here and now, but rather to what lives

37. Between April 3 and 19, Rudolf Steiner gave a lecture series in Helsinki called "The Spiritual Beings in the Heavenly Bodies and in the Kingdoms of Nature," published under the same title, Anthroposophic Press, 1992.

equally in all times and all places on earth, because it will bring us near to the secrets of the eternal in all existence. It will lead us to the ceaseless human search for the wellsprings of eternity, for the springs where they can find the elixir of what humans have called all-powerful love. For wherever we are gathered, we are gathered in the name of the search for wisdom and the search for love; we are gathered in nostalgia for the wellsprings of this love. What we seek is extended out into space and can be observed in the far horizon of the Cosmic All, but it can also be observed everywhere in the struggling human soul. It meets us especially when we turn our gaze to one of those mighty manifestations of the struggling human spirit that is given us in great works, like the one that is to form the basis of our present studies. We are going to speak of one of the greatest and most profound manifestations of the human spirit—the Bhagavad Gita, which, ancient as it is, yet in its foundations comes before us with renewed significance at the present time.

A short time ago the peoples of Europe, and those of the West generally, knew little of the Bhagavad Gita. Only during the last century has the fame of this wonderful poem extended to the West. Only lately have Western peoples become familiar with this marvelous song. But these lectures of ours will show that a real and deep knowledge of this poem, beyond mere familiarity with it, can only come when its esoteric foundations are more and more revealed. For what meets us in the Bhagavad Gita sprang from an age of which we have often spoken in connection with our anthroposophical studies. The mighty sentiments, feelings, and ideas it contains had their origin in an age that was still illumined by what was communicated through the old human clairvoyance. One who tries to feel what this poem breathes forth page by page as it speaks to us will experience, page by page, something like a breath of the ancient clairvoyance humanity once possessed.

The Western world's first acquaintance with this poem came in an age that had little understanding of the original clairvoyant sources from which it sprang. Nevertheless, this lofty song of the divine struck into the Western world like a wonderful flash of lightning, so that a certain Central European man, upon first encountering this Indian song, said that he must frankly consider himself happy to have lived

until the time when he could become acquainted with the wondrous things expressed in it. This man was acquainted with the spiritual life of humanity through the centuries, indeed through thousands of years. He was a man who looked deeply into spiritual life—Wilhelm von Humboldt, the celebrated astronomer's brother. Other Westerners, people of widely different origins, have felt the same. What a wonderful feeling it produces in us when we let this Bhagavad Gita work upon us, even in its opening verses!

It seems that, particularly in our circle, my dear friends, we often have to begin by working our way through to a fully unprejudiced position. Despite the fact that the Bhagavad Gita has been known for so short a time in the West, its holiness has so taken hearts by storm that we are inclined to approach it from the start with this sense of encountering a sacred text, and are thus unable to see clearly the poem's actual starting point. Let us look at it quite dispassionately, perhaps even a little excessively so.

We have before us a poem that from the very beginning sets us in the midst of a wild and stormy battle. We are introduced to a scene of action hardly less wild than that into which Homer straightway places us in the *Iliad*. We go on and are confronted in this scene with something that Arjuna—one of the foremost, perhaps *the* foremost of the personalities in the Song—feels from the start to be a fratricidal conflict. He comes before us as one horror-stricken by the battle, for there among the enemy, he sees his own blood relations [I.26]. His bow falls from his grasp when it becomes clear to him that he is to enter a murderous strife with men descended from the same ancestors as himself, men in whose veins flows the same blood as his own. We begin by empathizing with his dropping the bow and recoiling from the awful battle between brothers [I.27].

Then, before our gaze, arises Krishna, Arjuna's great spiritual teacher, and a wonderful, sublime teaching is brought before us in vivid colors. It appears as a teaching given to his pupil, but where is it all leading? That is the question we must first of all set before ourselves, because it is not enough just to give ourselves up to the great, seemingly sacred teaching in Krishna's words to Arjuna. The circumstances of its being given must also be studied. We must visualize the situa-

tion in which Krishna exhorts Arjuna not to quail before this battle with his brothers, but to pick up his bow and hurl himself with all his might into the devastating conflict [II.3]. Krishna's teachings emerge amid the battle like a cloud of spiritual light, incomprehensible at first. They require Arjuna not to recoil but to stand firm and do his duty in this battle. When we bring this picture before our eyes, it is almost as though the teaching becomes transformed by its setting. Then again, this setting leads us further into the whole weaving of the song of the *Mahabharata*, the mighty song of which the Bhagavad Gita is only a part.

Krishna's teaching leads us out into the storms of everyday life, into the wild confusion of human battles, errors, and earthly strife. His teaching appears almost like a justification of these human conflicts. If we regard the picture before us quite dispassionately, the Bhagavad Gita will perhaps suggest to us altogether different questions from those that arise when we approach things expecting to understand them, as if they were ordinary human deeds. So it is perhaps necessary to point first to the *setting* of the Gita in order to realize its world-historic significance, and then to be able to see how it can be of increasing and special significance in our own time.

I have already said that this majestic song came into the Western world as something completely new, and almost equally new were the feelings, perceptions, and thoughts that lie behind it. For what did Western civilization really know of Indian culture before it became acquainted with the Bhagavad Gita? Apart from various things that have only become known in the last century, very little indeed! With the exception of certain secret societies, Western civilization has had no direct knowledge of what is actually the central nerve-impulse of this great poem. When we approach such a thing, we feel how inadequate everyday human language, philosophy, and ideas are for it, and how little they suffice for describing such heights of human spiritual life upon earth. We need something quite different from ordinary descriptions to express what shines out to us from such a revelation of the human spirit.

I would like first of all to place two pictures before you as a foundation for further descriptions. The first is taken from the book itself, the

other from the spiritual life of the West. The latter is comparatively easy to understand, whereas for the time being the one from the book appears quite remote. To start with the former, we are told how, in the midst of the battle, Krishna appears and unveils before Arjuna cosmic secrets, immense teachings. His pupil is overcome by the strong desire to see the spiritual form of this soul, to know the one speaking such sublime teachings. He begs Krishna to show himself to him in his true spirit form in whichever way he can do so. Krishna appears to him (we shall return to this description later) in a form that embraces all things—a sublime, glorious beauty, a nobility that reveals cosmic mysteries. We shall see that there is little in the world to approach the glory of this description of how the teacher's sublime spirit form is revealed to the clairvoyant eye of his pupil [IX.17–25].

Before Arjuna's gaze lies the wild battlefield where much blood will have to flow and where the fratricidal struggle is to develop. The soul of Krishna's disciple is to be wafted away from this battlefield of devastation. It is to perceive and plunge into a world where Krishna lives in his true form. That is a world of holy bliss, removed from all strife and conflict, a world where the secrets of existence are unveiled, far away from everyday affairs. Yet the human soul, in its most inward, most essential being, belongs to that world. The soul must learn to know this world, and then it will have to descend from that world again to return to the chaotic, evil battles of this world. In truth, as we follow the description of this picture we may well ask ourselves what is really taking place in Arjuna's soul. What is the matter with this soul? It stands in the midst of a raging battle, as though the battle in which it stands were forced upon it. This soul feels related to a heavenly world in which there is no human suffering, no battle, no death. It longs to rise into a world of the eternal, but with the inevitability that can come only from the impulse of so sublime a being as Krishna, this soul must be forced downward into the chaotic confusion of the battle. Arjuna would gladly turn away from all this chaos, for the life of earth around him appears as something alien and remote, altogether unrelated to his soul. We can distinctly feel that his soul is still one of those that long for the higher worlds, that would live with the gods, and that perceives human life as something foreign and incomprehensible to them. In

truth it is an astounding picture, containing matters of sublime import: a hero, Arjuna, surrounded by other heroes and by the warrior hosts—a hero who feels all that is spread before him as unfamiliar and remote—and a god, Krishna, who is needed to direct him to this world. He does not understand this world until Krishna makes it comprehensible to him.

It may sound paradoxical, but I know that those who can enter into the matter more deeply will understand me when I say that Arjuna stands there like a human soul to whom the earthly aspect of the world must first be made comprehensible.

Now, this Bhagavad Gita comes to Westerners who undoubtedly do have an understanding for earthly things! It comes to humans who have attained such a high degree of materialistic civilization that they have a very good understanding for everything earthly. It has to be understood by souls that are separated by a deep gulf from our observation of Arjuna's soul. Things for which Arjuna shows no inclination, requiring Krishna to force him to "come down to earth," seem quite intelligible and obvious to the Westerner. The difficulty for Westerners seems rather to be an inability to lift themselves up to Arjuna, to whom must be imparted an understanding of what in the West is easily understood: physicality, earthly materiality. A god, Krishna, must make our civilization and culture intelligible to Arjuna. How easy it is in our time for people to understand what surrounds them! We need no Krishna. It is well for once to see clearly the mighty gulfs that can lie between different human natures, and not overestimate how easy it is for a Western soul to understand a nature like Krishna's or Arjuna's. Arjuna is human, but utterly different from those who have slowly and gradually evolved in Western civilization.

That is one picture I wanted to bring to you, for words cannot lead us more than a very little way into these things. Pictures that we can grasp with our souls can do better, because they speak not only to the understanding, but also to that in us which on earth will always be deeper than our understanding—to our power of perception and to our feeling.

I now would like to place another picture before you, one no less sublime than that from the Bhagavad Gita but one that stands infinitely

nearer to Western culture. We have in the West a beautiful, literary picture that Westerners know well and which is meaningful for them. But first let us ask, to what extent does Western humanity really believe that this being of Krishna once appeared before Arjuna and spoke those words? We are now at the starting point of a concept of the world that will lead us on until it is no mere matter of belief, but of knowledge. We are, however, only at the beginning of this conception, the point of departure of the anthroposophical conception of the world. The second picture is much nearer to us. It contains something to which Western civilization can respond.

We look back some five centuries before the founding of Christianity, to a soul whom one of the greatest spirits of Western lands made the central figure of all his reflections. We look back to Socrates. We watch in our mind's eye the dying Socrates, as Plato describes him in the circle of his disciples, in the famous discourse on the immortality of the soul.³⁸ In this picture there are but slight indications of the beyond, represented in the "daemon" who speaks to Socrates. Let him stand before us in the hours that preceded his entrance into the spiritual worlds. There he is, surrounded by his disciples, and in the face of death he speaks to them of the immortality of the soul. Many people have read the wonderful discourse wherein Plato described for us the scene of his teacher's death. But people nowadays read only words, only concepts and ideas. There are even those—I do not mean to censure them—in whom this wonderful scene of Plato arouses questions as to the logical justification of what the dying Socrates sets forth for his disciples. These are people who cannot feel that, for the human soul, there is something more important, more significant than logical proofs and scientific arguments. Let us imagine a contemporary of ours, a person of great culture, depth, and refinement, making the same statement Socrates makes about immortality but in a different situation from that of Socrates, under different circumstances. Even if the words of this person were a hundred times more logically sound than those of Socrates, in spite of it all they would perhaps have a hundred

38. See Plato, *Crito* and *Phaedo*.

times less value. This will only be fully grasped when people begin to understand that there is for the human soul something of more value, even if less plausible, than the most strictly correct logical demonstrations. If any highly educated and cultured teacher speaks to students on the immortality of the soul, it can indeed have significance. But its significance is not revealed in what is said—I know it will sound paradoxical, but it is true—its significance depends also on the fact that the teacher, having spoken these words to the students, goes on to look after the ordinary business of life, and the students do the same. Socrates speaks in the hour immediately preceding his passage through the gates of death. He gives out his teaching in the brief moment when his soul is about to be severed from his bodily form.

Let us now imagine one of Socrates's pupils, who could certainly have no doubt of the reality of all that surrounded him, being a Greek, and compare him with Krishna's disciple Arjuna. Think how the Greek must be introduced to the supersensible world, and then think of Arjuna, who can't have any doubt whatsoever about the supersensible world, but is confused instead by his relationship to the sensible/physical world, almost doubting the possibility of its existence. It is one thing to speak about immortality to the pupils he is leaving behind in the hour of his own death—which does not meet him unexpectedly, but as an event predetermined by destiny—and another thing to return to the ordinary business of living after such a discourse. It is not Socrates's words that should work on us, as much as the situation in which he speaks them. Let us take all the power of this scene, all that we receive from Socrates' conversation on immortality, the full immediate force of this picture. What do we have before us? It is the world of everyday life in Greek times, the world whose conflicts and struggles led to the best of the country's sons being condemned to drink hemlock. This noble Greek spoke these last words with the sole intention of bringing the souls of the men around him to believe in something of which they could no longer have knowledge, to believe in what was for them "a beyond," a spiritual world. That it needs a Socrates to lead earthly souls to gain an outlook into the spiritual worlds, that it needs him to do this by means of the strongest proofs—namely by his *deed*—is entirely comprehensible to Western

souls. Socrates's culture is quite understandable for Western souls. The image of Socrates standing in front of his students, placing them in the immediate presence of the reality of death, is easily understood by Western souls. We only grasp Western civilization correctly if we recognize that, in this respect, it has been a Socratic civilization for centuries, for millennia.

I know that history, philosophy, and other branches of knowledge may say, with apparently good reason, "Yes, but if you only look at what is written in the Bhagavad Gita and at Plato's works, it is just as easy to prove the opposite of what you have just said." I know too that those who speak like this do not want to feel the deeper impulses, the mighty impulses that arise on the one hand from that picture out of the Bhagavad Gita, and on the other from that of the dying Socrates as described by Plato. A deep gulf yawns between these two worlds, despite all their similarities. This is because the Bhagavad Gita marks the end of the age of the ancient clairvoyance. We can catch there its last echo, while in the dying Socrates we meet one of the first of those who through thousands of years wrestled with this kind of knowledge, these kinds of ideas, thoughts, and feelings, with people who were as if cast off by the old clairvoyance and who continued to evolve in the intervening time because they must prepare the way for a new clairvoyance. Today we are striving toward this new clairvoyance by announcing and receiving what we call the anthroposophical conception of the world. From a certain angle, we may say that no gulf is deeper than the one opening up between Arjuna and a disciple of Socrates.

We now live in a time when human souls, having gone through manifold transformations and incarnations in the search for life in external knowledge, are once more seeking to make connections with the spiritual worlds. The fact that you are sitting here is living proof that your own souls are seeking this reunion. You are seeking the connection that will lead you in a new way up to the worlds so wondrously revealed to us in Krishna's words to his disciple Arjuna. So there is much in the esoteric wisdom on which the Bhagavad Gita is founded that resonates for us, that responds to our deepest longings. In ancient times, the soul was well aware of its bond with the spiritual.

It was at home in the supersensible realm. We are now at the beginning of an age wherein the human soul will once again seek access to spiritual worlds in a new way. We must feel stimulated in this search when we think that such access was once available to human beings. Indeed, we shall find it to an unusual degree in the revelations of the sacred song of India.

As is generally the case with the great human works, we find that the opening words of the Bhagavad Gita are full of meaning. (Are not the opening words of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* most significant?) The story is told by his charioteer to the blind king, the chief of the Kurus who are engaged in fratricidal battle with the Pandavas. A blind chieftain! This already seems symbolic. Ancient people had vision into the spiritual worlds. With their whole heart and soul they lived in connection with gods and divine beings. Everything that surrounded them in the earthly sphere was in unceasing connection with divine existence. Then came another age, and just as Greek legend depicts Homer as a blind man, so the Gita tells us of the blind chief of the Kurus. It is to him that Krishna's discourses, in which he instructs Arjuna concerning goings on in the world of the senses, are directed. He must even be told of those things of the sense world that are projections into it from the spiritual world. There is something deeply symbolic in the fact that old men who looked back with perfect memory and a perfect spiritual connection into a primeval past, were *blind* to the world immediately around them. They were seers in the spirit, seers in the soul. They could experience as though in lofty images all that lived as spiritual mysteries. Those who were to understand the events of the world in their spiritual connections were pictured as blind in the old songs and legends. Thus we find the same symbol in the Greek singer Homer as in the figure that meets us at the beginning of the Bhagavad Gita. This introduces us to the age of transition from ancient humanity to that of the present day.

Now, why is Arjuna so deeply moved by the impending battle of the brothers? We know that the old clairvoyance was in a sense bound up with external blood relationships. In ancient times, the flowing of the same blood in the veins of a number of people was rightly looked upon as something sacred, because it was connected to the ancient percep-

tion of a particular group soul. Those who not only felt but knew their blood relationship to one another did not yet have the kind of ego that lives in present-day humans. Wherever we look in those ancient times, we find groups of people who did not at all feel that they were each an individual “I,” as we do today. Each person’s identity was felt *only within the group*, within a community based upon blood ties.

What does the folk soul, the nation soul, signify to a person today? Certainly it is often an object of the greatest enthusiasm. Yet compared with the individual “I” of a person, we may say that this nation soul does not really count. This may be a hard saying but it is true. Once upon a time, a person did not say “I” to him- or herself, but to the tribal or racial *group*. This group-soul feeling was still living in Arjuna when he saw the fratricidal battle raging around him. That is the reason why this battle filled him with such horror [I.28–35].

Let us enter Arjuna’s soul and feel his horror when he realized how those who belonged together were about to murder each other. He felt that what lived in all the souls at that time *was about to kill itself*. He felt the way a soul would feel if its body, which is its very own, were being torn to pieces. He felt as though the members of one body were in conflict, the heart with the head, the left hand with the right. In this mood, Arjuna is met by the great teacher Krishna. Here we must call attention to the incomparable manner with which Krishna is pictured in this scene: the holy god, who stands there teaching Arjuna what humanity must discard if we wish to take the right direction in its evolution. And what does Krishna mention? “I,” and “I,” and “I,” and always only “I.” “I am in the earth, I am in the water, I am in the air, I am in the fire, in all souls, in all manifestations of life, even in the holy Aum. I am the wind that blows through the forests. I am the greatest of the mountains, of the rivers. I am the greatest among men. I am all that is best in the old seer Kapila” [see IX.17–18; X.25–42]. Truly Krishna says nothing less than this, “I recognize nothing else than myself and I admit the world’s existence only in so far as it is I!” Nothing else than “I” speaks out from the teaching of Krishna.

We should see, once and for all, quite plainly how Arjuna stands there as one who does not yet understand himself as an ego, but now must do so. The God confronts him like a cosmic egotist, admitting

of nothing but himself, even requiring others to admit of nothing but themselves, each one an "I." Yes, in all that is in earth, water, fire or air, in all that lives upon the earth, in the three worlds, we are to see nothing but Krishna.

It is of momentous significance for us that one who cannot yet grasp the ego is brought for instruction before a being who demands to be recognized only as his own Self. Let him who wants to see this in the light of truth read the Bhagavad Gita through and try to answer the question, "How can we designate what Krishna says of himself and that for which he demands recognition?" It is *universal egotism* that speaks in Krishna. It does indeed seem as though through the whole of the sublime Gita this refrain resounds to our spiritual ear: "Only if you recognize, you humans, my all-embracing egotism, only then can salvation be for you!"

The greatest achievements of human spiritual life always set us riddles. We only see them in the right light when we recognize that they set us the very greatest riddles. Truly, a hard one seems to be given us when we are now confronted with the task of understanding how a most sublime teaching can be bound up with the announcement of universal egotism. It is not through logic but in the perception of the great contradictions in life that the esoteric mysteries unveil themselves to us. It will be our task to get beyond what seems so strange and come to the truth within maya.

Our task will be to reach truth by overcoming some remarkable aspects of maya, so that we shall know just what it is we call egotism when we speak from inside maya. This riddle will lead us out of maya, to reality, to the light of truth. Our next lectures will examine how to take that step into reality.