Why I read the Gita: Hope in the face of defeat

by Carol Zaleski in the May 4, 2010 issue

T. S. Eliot once declared—and I agree—that the greatest philosophical poem next to the *Divine Comedy* is the *Bhagavad Gita* ("Song of the Blessed One"), the most widely revered of the sacred texts of India. Once or twice a year I reread the *Gita*, relying on several fine English translations and limping through the Sanskrit with the help of interlinear editions. It never ceases to delight. Like all great reading, but with peculiar intensity, reading the *Gita* takes me into another world, enabling me to see our common world through other eyes. In the *Gita* I encounter a devotional and philosophical tradition, tested in experience and crafted in song and dialectic, that is intrinsically worth studying. If life is, as John Keats wrote, a "vale of soul-making," then the *Gita* has taught me a great deal about how souls are made.

The setting makes a compelling tale: Pandu, king of the Kurus, has died, leaving his brother, the blind Dhritarashtra, to serve as regent until Yudhishthira, eldest of Pandu's five sons, comes of age. But Duryodhana, eldest of Dhritarashtra's hundred sons, craving the glory of kingship, has cheated Yudhishthira of his succession by means of a crooked dice game. After 13 years of exile, the five sons of Pandu return to set right a usurpation that by its very nature spells disorder and ruin. Diplomacy fails; war is inevitable. The opposing armies assemble with their banners and bows on the field of the Kurus. A heartrending tumult of conchs, cymbals, trumpets and drums breaks forth and the battle is about to be engaged, when Arjuna, third son of Pandu, halts his chariot between the ranks. So might a noble warrior pause to survey the scene before the great deeds begin. But seeing his own kinsmen among the enemy, Arjuna is devastated: "My limbs give way, my mouth dries up, I tremble, the hairs of my flesh stand on end." Such a kin-slaying is doomed to unleash the very evils it was intended to overcome; survivors will scatter and take up foreign ways, neglecting the sacrifices that sustain the family. Realizing this, Arjuna sinks down, dejected, and refuses to fight.

Suddenly it is as if time were suspended, invaded from within by a divine presence imperceptible to the other combatants. Arjuna's chariot driver—who is none other than Krishna-Vasudeva, the god who encompasses and transcends all space and time—undertakes to initiate Arjuna, delivering 18 discourses on how to act in a world marred by delusion and malice. The field of the Kurus, it turns out, is the field of *dharma* (sacred order), of action and of the human heart.

The *Gita* takes for granted the broad outlines of classical Indian philosophy: all beings act according to their inborn nature, forged by past lives; and all actions sow seeds whose fruit must be consumed in future lives. Kin-slaying merits rebirth in hell, but even the most shining actions are "golden handcuffs," as 13th-century philosopher Pillai Lokacharya puts it, binding one to the cycle of birth and death. The *Gita* offers a key to unlock these handcuffs. Yet one need not believe in rebirth to feel the force of the *Gita's* soteriology; one need only recognize that human beings, left to their own devices, are profoundly unfree.

Krishna's first message to Arjuna is that he should accept his social identity as a warrior. You have a sacred duty, he tells Arjuna; it's not open to you to take up the life of an ascetic. Fulfill your vocation, and I will show you the path to freedom. Gradually, Krishna discloses to Arjuna the reality of the self which is neither born nor dies, ultimately revealing (with a blinding theophany and a series of stunning "I AM" statements) that it is Krishna's ceaseless divine action that alone sustains the world. Do your job without attachment to the results, Krishna counsels; offer your deeds as a sacrifice, and take refuge in me. Think on me now and at the hour of your death, and I will carry you safely across the flood. In brief compass the *Gita* harnesses all the ancient Indian systems of spiritual discipline in the service of a genuine novum: the emerging devotional (*bhakti*) movement.

What does this mean to a Christian? Before I venture to say, I want to be sure I've heard the *Gita's* own voice. Yet I have to admit that despite essential differences, it strikes an undeniably Christian chord. I cannot read the *Gita* without being reminded of the one thing needful on the field of action: to serve wholeheartedly without imagining we can control the results. "The Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.'" I cannot read the *Gita* without being consoled by the one sure hope in the face of inevitable defeats: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."