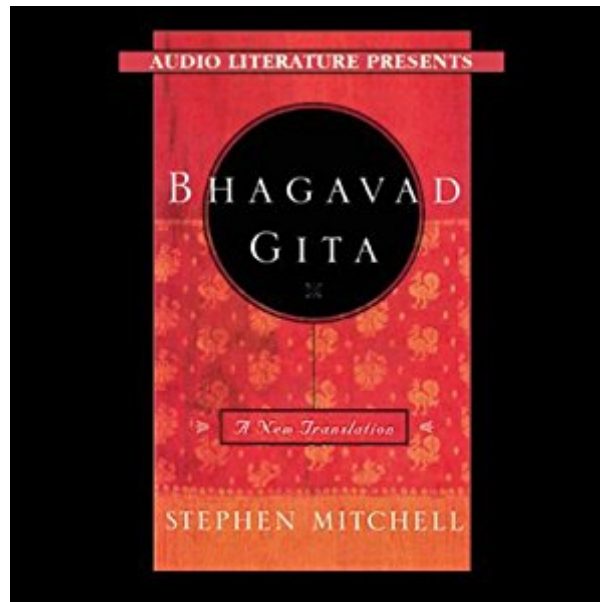


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Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation



Synopsis

Prince Arjuna faces a dilemma that troubles many people sooner or later - whether to take action that is necessary but morally ambiguous. The difference is that Arjuna's action is to wage war against his own family. With the armies arrayed, Arjuna loses his nerve. Krishna, his charioteer and incarnation of divine consciousness, begins to teach him about the nature of God and of himself. Arjuna learns that he can attain liberation through union with God, and that there are several possible paths to this goal. This most famous and revered of Hindu scriptures tells the timeless story of the paths of knowledge, devotion, action, and meditation. Stephen Mitchell's acclaimed translation, read by him for the first time, brings this ancient story to life and shows how it became the seed for all the Hindu systems of philosophy and religion that followed.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 2 hours and 58 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Phoenix Books

Audible.com Release Date: June 28, 2013

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00DP8C8J0

Best Sellers Rank: #16 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Hinduism > Sacred Writings >

Bhagavad Gita #81 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Religion & Spirituality > Buddhism & Eastern Religions

Customer Reviews

I really like Stephen Mitchell's work, but it's important to know what you're getting. What you're ordinarily not getting is a straight-up translation of the source text; you're getting Mitchell's attempt to render the source text into a fine English poem that expresses the spiritual insights he wants it to express. (Examples: his excellent interpretive renderings of the Psalms and the Tao Te Ching. They are excellent interpretive renderings; they are not translations.) Even when the translation is straightforward, he tends to chop the text to bits and just keep the parts he agrees with. (Examples: his translation of the book of Genesis, which includes the entire text but relegates the "spiritually suspect" parts to an appendix, and his rendering of the book of Job, which includes

some terrific translation but omits the speech of Elihu and the poem in praise of wisdom.) And now he's done the Bhagavad Gita. Has he translated it, or has he interpretively rendered it? Well, the first point to make is that he has included the entire text and limited himself to offering commentary on the parts he doesn't agree with. (Incidentally, I tend to disagree with the same parts and I understand that there have been Hindu scholars who have at least raised the same questions that Mitchell does.) This point alone means that Mitchell's Gita is a landmark: he hasn't chopped up the text in order to leave out the "spiritually inferior" portions. So how good is his translation? Well, Mitchell says his own Sanskrit is "rudimentary," but that doesn't mean (as some reviewers seem to think) that he doesn't know any at all. (This is a bit different from his Tao Te Ching, in which he admits that he just doesn't read Chinese.

First of all this is a beautiful book. The design by Barbara Sturman in which the text is presented in a handsome wine/purple font set in wide margins with the chapter titles in a contemporary font of soft vermillion suggests reverence for the Gita while hinting of a twenty-first century Western appreciation. There is a ribbon sown into the binder for keeping your place. Second, the emphasis is on the text of the Gita itself garlanded by Mitchell's brief introduction and his "About the Translation" and a most appropriate and valuable appendix, "The Message of the Gita" by Mohandas K. Gandhi from his Collected Works. Third, there is the translation itself, which is poetic and easily accessible to the contemporary reader without diluting the sacred essence of this great work of spirituality. Mitchell, who has had extensive experience rendering poetic and spiritual works into English, including a much-admired translation of the Tao Te Ching, worked hard at fusing "the dignity of formal verse" into a "sound like natural speech" (p. 32). Rather than go through torturous artificialities in trying to fit all of the text into metric lines, Mitchell has chosen to present some of the Gita in prose. Thus the opening chapter, which he calls "Arjuna's Despair," in which the scene is set and the participants identified, is gracefully told in prose, as is the introduction of the second chapter until Krishna speaks. The effect is beautiful, since it highlights the importance of what Krishna is about to say in a speech that really begins the poem and the teaching. (Shakespeare used this technique.) Mitchell has solved the problem of the word "yoga," a long time bugaboo for English translators of the Gita, by sometimes using "yoga" and sometimes using "discipline."

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