

# Death and Beyond: Comparative Reflections on World Religious Traditions

“Little Gems” for the Smithsonian Program  
Saturday, November 19, 2022

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## VERSES FROM BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ

—Select verses from my translation, *Bhagavad Gītā: The Beloved Lord’s Secret Love Song*  
(Harper One / Harper Collins Publishers, 2010).

Never, truly,  
    have I ever not existed—  
    nor you, nor these kings  
    who protect the people,  
And never  
    shall any of us  
    ever cease to be,  
    now or forevermore.

Just as the embodied  
    while in this body  
    passes through childhood,  
    youth, and old age,  
So also the embodied  
    attains another body—  
    the wise person  
    is not bewildered by this. (2.12-13)

Of the impermanent  
    one finds no being;  
    one finds no nonbeing  
    of the permanent.  
Indeed, the certainty  
    of both of these  
    has been perceived  
    by seers of the truth. (2.16)

It does not take birth,  
nor does it ever die.  
Such a being has never  
come into being,  
nor shall it ever  
come to be.  
It is unborn, eternal,  
everlasting,  
and primeval.  
It is not slain  
when the body is slain. (2.20)

One who sees the Self  
present in all beings  
and all beings present  
within the Self—  
Such a person,  
whose self  
is absorbed in yoga,  
sees the same everywhere.

One who sees me everywhere  
and sees all things in me,  
To such a person I am never lost  
nor is such a person ever lost to me.

One who,  
abiding in oneness,  
offers love to me  
as the One who abides  
in all beings,  
In whatever way one  
appears to be living—  
that one is a yogi  
who lives in me. (6.29-31)

The greatest secret of all,  
once more please hear---  
it is my supreme message:  
"You are so much loved by me!"  
Thereupon I shall continue  
declaring this message for you,  
which I have set forth into motion. (18.64)

**SUMMARY OF THE RĀSA LĪLĀ STORY FROM THE BHĀGAVATA PURĀṆA**  
by Graham M. Schweig (from *Dance of Divine Love*, Princeton University Press)

The Rāsa Līlā is set in a sacred realm of enchantment in the land known as Vraja, far beyond the universe, within the highest domain of the heavenly world. This sacred realm also imprints itself onto part of our world as the earthly Vraja, a rural area known as Vraja Maṇḍala (“the circular area of Vraja”) in northern India, about eighty miles south of the modern capital city of Delhi.<sup>1</sup> Vraja is described as a land of idyllic natural beauty, filled with abundant foliage heavy with fruit and bloom, roaming cows, and brightly colored birds singing melodiously. The Rāsa Līlā takes place in the earthly Vraja during the bountiful autumn season, when evenings abound with soothing scents and gentle river breezes. The following is a summary of the five chapters of the Rāsa Līlā story from the *Bhāgavata’s* tenth book:

One special evening, the rising moon reached its fullness with a resplendent glow. Its reddish rays lit up the forest as night-blooming lotus flowers began to unfold. The forest during those nights was decorated profusely with delicate starlike jasmine flowers, resembling the flowing dark hair of goddesses adorned with flower blossoms. So rapturous was this setting that the supreme Lord himself, as Krishna, the eternally youthful cowherd, was compelled to play captivating music on his flute. Moved by this beautiful scene, Krishna was inspired toward love.

Upon hearing the alluring flute music, the cowherd maidens, known as the Gopīs,<sup>2</sup> who were already in love with Krishna, abruptly left their homes, families and domestic duties. They ran off to join him in the moonlit forest. Krishna and the Gopīs met and played on the banks of the Yamunā River. When the maidens became proud of his loving attention, however, their beloved Lord suddenly vanished from their sight. The Gopīs searched everywhere for Krishna. Discovering that he had run off with one special maiden, they soon found that she too had been deserted by him. As darkness engulfed the forest, the cowherd maidens gave up their search, singing sweet songs of hope and despair, longing

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<sup>1</sup> Vraja (commonly spelled and pronounced as the Hindi “Braj”) is a region covering approximately 1450 square miles. At the heart of Vraja is the forest village of Vrindāvana, the home of Krishna, and the city of Mathurā, Krishna’s birthplace. Vrindāvana is located between Delhi and the city of Agra (the home of the Taj Mahal, about 34 miles to the south). Throughout the Rāsa Līlā passage, Vraja is interchangeable with and often refers to Vrindāvana.

<sup>2</sup> Gopīs is plural for Gopī, “a female cowherd,” pronounced as the English word “go,” and “-pī,” as the English word “pea.”

for his return. Then Krishna cleverly reappeared and spoke to them on the nature of love.

The story culminates in the commencement of the Rāsa dance. The Gopīs link arms together, forming a great circle. By divine arrangement, Krishna dances with every cowherd maiden at once, yet each one thinks she is dancing with him alone. Supreme love has now reached its perfect fulfillment and expression through joyous dancing and singing long into the night, in the divine circle of the Rāsa. Retiring from the vigorous dancing, Krishna and the Gopīs refresh themselves by bathing in the river. Then, reluctantly, the cowherd maidens return to their homes.

### KEY VERSES FROM THE BHĀGAVATA PURĀṆA

—*Dance of Divine Love: India's Classic Sacred Love Story: The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna* (Princeton University Press, 2005), trans. by Graham M. Schweig. The abridged version of this book is forthcoming in 2023 from Oxford University Press, entitled *The Yoga of Love: When Divinity Calls Our Souls to Dance: The Rāsa Līlā: Krishna from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

Even the Beloved Lord,  
seeing those nights  
in autumn filled with  
blooming jasmine flowers,  
Turned his mind toward  
love's delights,  
fully taking refuge in  
Yogamāyā's illusive powers. 1.1

Then the moon,  
king among stars, arose,  
Spreading soothing reddish rays  
over the face of the eastern horizon;  
Dispelling the sorrow  
from those who looked on,  
As a lover caresses his beloved's blushed face,  
consoling her after long separation. 1.2

Seeing lotus flowers bloom  
and the perfect circle of the moon  
Beaming like the face of Ramā,  
reddish as fresh *kumkuma*;  
Seeing the forest colored  
by the moon's gentle rays,  
He began to make sweet music,  
melting the hearts of  
fair maidens with beautiful eyes. 1.3

Upon hearing that sweet music,  
their passion for him swelling,  
The young women of Vraja whose  
minds were captured by Krishna,  
Unaware of one another,  
ran off toward the place  
Where their beloved was waiting,  
with their earrings swinging wildly. 1.4

...

Their husbands,  
fathers, brothers----  
all relatives endeavored  
to detain them.  
Since their hearts  
had been stolen by Govinda,  
they who were entranced  
did not turn back.<sup>3</sup> 1.8

Some Gopīs,  
unable to leave,  
had gone inside their homes.  
With eyes closed,  
fully absorbed in love,  
they meditated upon Krishna.<sup>4</sup> 1.9

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<sup>3</sup> Govinda: Krishna, "one who tends the cows."

<sup>4</sup> Gopīs: "cowherd maidens"; the fair young women of Vraja; the collective heroines of the story.

The intense burning  
of unbearable separation  
from their dearest beloved  
disrupted all inauspiciousness;  
Due to the joy  
of embracing Acyuta  
attained through meditation,  
even their worldly happiness was lost.<sup>5</sup> 1.10

Certainly, he is the supreme Soul,  
though they knew him  
intimately as their lover.  
They relinquished their bodies  
composed of material elements,  
and any worldly bondage  
was instantly destroyed. 1.11

...

They were overjoyed  
by the touch of Krishna,  
and the whole universe  
became filled  
with their song. 5.9



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<sup>5</sup> Acyuta: Krishna, “the infallible one.”

## THE BODHISATTVA'S VOW OF UNIVERSAL REDEMPTION

—From *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, ed. by E.A.Burt

A Bodhisattva resolves: I take upon myself the burden of all suffering. I am resolved to do so, I will endure it. I do not turn away or run away, do not tremble, am not terrified, nor afraid, do not turn back or despond.

And why? At all costs I must bear the burdens of all beings. In that I do not follow my own inclinations. I have made the vow to save all beings. All beings I must set free. The whole world of living beings I must rescue, from the errors of birth, of old age, of sickness, of death and rebirth., of all kinds of moral offence, of all states of woe, of the whole cycle of birth-and-death, of the jungle of false views, of the loss of wholesome dharmas, of the concomitants of ignorance, —from all these terrors I must rescue all beings. . . . I walk so that the kingdom of unsurpassed cognition is built up for all beings. My endeavors do not merely aim at my own deliverance. For with the help of the boat of the thought of all-knowledge, I must rescue all these beings from the stream of Samsāra, which is so difficult to cross; I must pull them back from the great precipice, I must free them from all calamities, I must ferry them across the stream of Samsāra. I myself must grapple with the whole mass of suffering of all beings. To the limit of my endurance I will experience in all the states of woe, found in any world system, all the abodes of suffering. And I must not cheat all beings out of my store of merit. I am resolved to abide in each single state of woe for numberless aeons; and so I will help all beings to freedom, in all the states of woe that may be found in any world system whatsoever.

And why? Because it is surely better that I alone should be in pain than that all these beings should fall into the states of woe. There I must give myself away as a pawn through which the whole world is redeemed from the terrors of the hells, of animal birth, of the world of Yama (the god of judgment and death); and with this my own body I must experience, for that sake of all beings, the whole mass of all painful feelings. And on behalf of all beings I give surety for all beings, and in doing so I speak truthfully, am trustworthy, and do not go back on my word. I must not abandon all beings.

And why? There has arisen in me the will to win all-knowledge, with all beings for its object, that is to say, for the purpose of setting free the entire world of beings. And I have not set out for the supreme enlightenment from a desire for delights, not because I hope to experience the delights of the five sense-qualities, or because I wish to indulge in the pleasures of the senses. And I do not pursue the course of a Bodhisattva in order to achieve that array of delights that can be found in the various worlds of sense-desire.

And why? Truly no delights are all these delights of the world. All this indulging in the pleasures of the senses belongs to the sphere of Mara (the goddess of death).

**THE APOSTLE PAUL ON THE POWER OF DEATH**  
*Philippians 2.1-18, The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV)*

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--- even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you---and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.



## CRUCIFIXION DRAWING OF ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

—From my book chapter, “Imagery of Divine Love: The Crucifix Drawing of St. John of the Cross,” in *St. John of the Cross, Carmelite Studies VI* (Institute of Carmelite Studies Press, 1992).



St. John wrote very detailed and didactic treatises, but he also utilized aesthetic forms for expressing his religious experiences. He wrote much poetry which communicated divine matters in a way that mere prose could not, and thus all his treatises are commentaries on his poetry. As for this drawing, it is known to be the product of a vision. But he chose not to express this vision in poetry. Apparently, the subject of this vision was better communicated through a picture than through any verbal expression.

The work was obviously derived from inner religious experience; for its style and composition are unique. It was not meant to be a public image, or even an icon. Rather, it was the pure and simple expression of an esoteric vision, shared only with his fellow spiritual aspirants. Therefore, if we are to interpret this drawing, we must go to St. John's works. In St. John's prose or poetry, it is rare to find anything which relates the crucifixion to his doctrine of the divine marriage. But we do find three small stanzas in one of his less known poems. Here, Christ is speaking to the Father:

Your great power will be seen  
And Your justice and wisdom.  
I will go and tell the world,  
Spreading the word  
Of Your beauty and sweetness  
And of Your sovereignty.

I will go seek My bride  
And take upon Myself  
Her weariness and labors  
In which she suffers so;

And that she may have life  
I will die for her  
And, lifting her out of that deep,  
I will restore her to You.

—*Romance 7, "The Incarnation,"* vs. 9-11, from *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991).

If we interpret St. John's drawing of the crucifix in light of these few verses, then the mystery of his work is revealed. As these verses plainly express, Christ, the Bridegroom, wants to relieve the bride, or the soul, of her suffering by taking it upon himself. And in doing so, he restores her to the Father.

The viewer of this work is verily the bride, who is looking on from above at the tortured Bridegroom, and who is compelled in the direction of the light source, being restored to the

Father. The picture, even more than these revealing verses convey the absolute suffering and sacrifice of Christ, expressing his intensity of love for the bride. While the bride experiences feelings of grief and separation, the light provides a sense of the presence of the Father to whom the bride is restored. Thus the crucifix for St. John is an expression of the intensity of love that the Bridegroom has for the bride as she enters the inner life of God.

### RELEVANT BIBLICAL PASSAGES

“We must all die; we are like water split on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again” (2 Samuel 14:14).

With sweat on your brow  
shall you eat your bread,  
until you return to the soil,  
as you were taken from it.  
For dust you are  
and to dust you shall return.

Genesis 3:19

“To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

“The Lord gives, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

My life is on the brink of Sheol;  
I am numbered among those who go down to the Pit,  
A man bereft of strength:  
A man alone, down among the dead,  
Among the slaughtered in their graves,  
Among those you have forgotten,  
Those deprived of your protecting hand.

Psalms 88:4-6

Wretched, slowly dying since my youth,  
I bore your terrors—now I am exhausted;  
your anger overwhelmed me,  
you destroyed me with your terrors  
which, like a flood, were around me, all day long,  
all together closing in on me.  
You have turned my friends and neighbors against me,  
now darkness is my one companion left.

Psalms 88:14-17

Alleluia! I love! For Yahweh listens to my entreaty;  
he bends down to listen to me what I call.  
Death's cords were tightening around me, the nooses of Sheol;  
distress and anguish gripped me.  
I invoked the name of Yahweh:  
“Yahweh, rescue me!”

Psalms 116:1-4