If you achieve enlightenment, how will you know?

A warrior on the battlefield faces an army and begins to tremble. Not because he is afraid of loss, nor because he is weak or cowardly; he trembles because he can't bring himself to fight his venerable granduncle, esteemed teacher, and close kinsmen to the death over material gain. He knows he is fighting for good, and, bound by duty, even those he respects have been forced to the side of evil. Yet he's paralyzed with indecision.

At this crucial moment, the warrior-prince Arjuna turns to his charioteer, Lord Sri Krishna, God incarnate in the world. To show Arjuna the path of Dharma (roughly translated to duty), the Lord explains the flaws in the prince's thinking: Arjuna saw the war as the murder of his relatives to gain a kingdom. However rightful their claim, Arjuna saw this as morally unjustifiable.

In the opening chapters of this holy dialogue, seen as scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*, to Hindus, Krishna describes His perspective. In His eyes, Arjuna could not kill the opposing warriors, since they are not the body, but the soul, "indestructible, eternal, unborn and immutable"[1] whose material deaths were inevitable and had been arranged by Him, and the battle was not being fought to gain a kingdom, it was being fought solely "on religious principle", of which "there is no greater engagement for a warrior".[2]

The second chapter, often read as a condensed summary of the *Gita*'s key teachings on the distinction between the mutable body and immutable soul and on detachment, devotion, and surrender, contains Arjuna's key question: "O Keshava (Krishna), what is the disposition of one who is situated in divine consciousness? How does an enlightened person talk? How does he sit? How does he walk?"[3]

To understand whether one would know if they themselves are enlightened, we need to define enlightenment and the nature of the awareness one may have regarding it. My aim in this essay is to show that diverse theological schools of thought converge on a paradoxical view: the enlightened would know if asked, yet the question itself would never arise. Being a practicing Hindu and knowing that Indian traditions have some of the most detailed and debate-tested corpora on the subject, I have decided to start with Krishna's response to Arjuna on the plains of Kurukshetra.

Before that response, a working definition. We say enlightenment is defined by the metaphysical shift from material to transcendental, the ethical shift from inconsistency to

perfection, the psychological shift from material entanglement to detachment, and the epistemic shift from ego to humility. Our focus concentrates on the latter two.

This raises a real philosophical difficulty. We can split beliefs about our mental states into those we cannot be wrong about, like being in pain, and those we can be mistaken about, like being happy or virtuous; enlightenment, as an internal shift, sits closer to the latter. William James calls such states "noetic": they are rooted in some form of knowledge; even when defined by an action, the initial knowledge stands as the root.[4] Indeed, save transience, James' definition of mystical experiences almost perfectly maps to enlightenment. William Alston pushes this further: transcendental experience's self-circular nature is not fallacious, but its intuition is comparable to sense-perception.[5] If they are right, the enlightened would simply know. Yet Swinburne, defender of religious experience, concedes a flaw: personal intuition, from perception to enlightenment, may well be wrong, since psychiatric and pharmacological states can produce equally convincing false convictions.[6] The question, then, is not whether the enlightened would feel certain – we can grant they would – but whether tradition can supply an external test. Krishna's answer offers exactly such a criterion.

"One whose mind remains undisturbed amidst misery, who does not crave for pleasure, and who is free from attachment, fear, and anger, is called a sage of steady wisdom. One who remains unattached under all conditions and is neither delighted by good fortune nor dejected by tribulation, he is a sage with perfect knowledge."[7] The symptoms of enlightenment described herein are concerned with the individual's response to outcomes. Krishna is advocating for full detachment, where one experiences but neither longs nor dreads emotions, and who is indifferent to the outcomes of his prescribed duty.

This ideal is not religiously or culturally unique to Hinduism; beyond the obvious parallels with Buddhism and Jainism, it is recommended in Christian, Muslim, and even secular literature.

Paul in his letter to the Philippians 4:12 says "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want", echoing the sentiments outlined by Krishna.

The same ideal even appears in secular literature: Kipling's "If–" urges its addressee to "meet with Triumph and Disaster / And treat those two impostors just the same", advocating the same outcome-detachment found thousands of years earlier in the scriptures.

To see how this state is achieved, we can turn once more to Krishna's words. He recommends four parallel paths to enlightenment: control of the body and senses (Raja Yoga), distinguishing the material from the immaterial (Jnana Yoga), work without attachment to outcomes (Karma Yoga), and cultivating love for the Supreme (Bhakti Yoga). In the final chapter, He summarizes:

> "Being purified by his intelligence and controlling the mind with determination, giving up the objects of sense gratification, being freed from attachment and hatred … who is always in trance and who is detached, free from false ego, false strength, false pride, lust, anger, and acceptance of material things … such a person is certainly elevated to the position of self-realization."[8]

However, He ends this with a secret, a path that bypasses yet fulfils every step of the process:

> "Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear."[9]

This unconditional surrender, known as Sharanagatti, is the utmost fulfilment of Krishna's instruction, and herein lies the transferable argument: total surrender and faith in a higher power would be absolutely sufficient to achieve detachment by itself. You would act only on His will, not your own, and you would be unattached to any outcome by virtue of absolute trust in His judgement. This, I would argue, is also how the Bible and the Quran also define enlightenment.

Proverbs 3:5-6 echoes the idea: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding". This couplet advocates complete reliance on God, confident He will show the path. The apostles of the New Testament carry these Jewish ideas forward; belief in God as Jesus Christ is not a recommendation in Christianity – it is a requirement for salvation.

Turning our attention to the Quran, we find echoes of the same principle. Surah An-Nisa 4:125 asks "who is better in faith than those who fully submit themselves to Allah". Indeed, Islam itself translates to submission, specifically the submission to God.

Whilst they often disagree, the Indian and Abrahamic corpora agree here: absolute surrender to God is the liberating path. But how would one be self-aware of such a state?

Fundamentally, these schools teach that post-surrender, something changes within. Your soul was never the doer and so stops pretending to be. You become the witness, transcendent to your desires and attachments. Your body is like a car: someone else was always in the driving seat, you just kept distracting them by pointing the wrong way.

All these theistic faiths utilize the idea of God present within you here. Hinduism speaks of God's nature as the supreme soul (Paramatma) and the inner controller/witness (Antaryamin). The *Bhagavatam* describes:

> "By chance, two birds have made a nest together in the same tree. The two birds are friends and are of a similar nature. One of them, however, is eating the fruits of the tree, whereas the other, who does not eat the fruits, is in a superior position due to His potency."[10]

Krishna asserts Himself to be that second bird, "I am seated in everyone's heart, and from Me come remembrance, knowledge and forgetfulness".[11] Christianity famously has this in the form of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. Paul writes in Galatians 2:20 "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me", a near-perfect echo of the witness-not-actor logic the *Bhagavatam* describes; Surah Al-Anfal 8:17 makes a similar point: "And you threw not, [O Muhammad], when you threw, but it was Allah who threw", where agency itself is relocated from the surrendered self to God.

Two objections, however, push back against this synthesis. The first is that Buddhist enlightenment, based on anatta (no-self), seems irreconcilable with the theistic accounts above, which all assume a soul that surrenders to a personal God. The second is that the inward criterion we have described – being the witness rather than the doer – is in fact the same structure as a particular kind of self-deception, indistinguishable in principle from delusion, or from the dissociative states neuroscience can induce.

To the first, we can see that anatta and atman, however metaphysically opposed, arrive at the same place: the dissolution of egoic identification, however they differ on what remains. Jay Garfield, working within Madhyamaka, argues that the no-self doctrine rejects only the reified, independent self, not the experiential continuum that notices this rejection.[12] Whilst Buddhism, associating enlightenment and nirvana (salvation), posits that the individual must work for it, the end result is still an observational state with dharma followed spontaneously.[14]

To the second, we argue the objection is weaker than it looks. The traditional criterion of enlightenment is not certainty about an inner state; it is the outward fruit of detachment under pressure, the steady mind in misery that Krishna lays out in BG 2:56-57. Hinduism makes this its pramana: Sri Ramanujacharya, in his *Gita Bhasya,* reads these verses as describing the outward marks of the sthitaprajna, the sage of steady wisdom – a way of living recognizable over time, particularly when life turns difficult, not an inner feeling to be reported.[13] Drug-

induced calm and dissociative states fit James' mystical requirement of transience, but sthitaprajna is eternal.[15] A deluded person fails this test the moment conditions become unbearable; a genuine one is unaffected. This shifts the evidence from how you feel inside to how you live outside, giving us, in principle, a way of telling them apart.

This yields two conclusions in productive tension. The first: enlightenment is a completely distinct experience, and if questioned on the matter, the enlightened would absolutely know. The second, however, is that you would never actually ask – you've surrendered yourself and your thoughts to the will of God, and such a thought, rooted in the self's accomplishments, would never cross such a mind. This is in fact reflected even in atheistic Buddhism, where the *Diamond Sutra*'s 9th chapter asks, "Do those who find the river think, 'I have attained the goal of finding the river'?"

We return, then, to Arjuna on the battlefield. His question to Krishna – how the enlightened talk, sit, and walk – contains the very paradox this essay has traced. The *Gita*, the Gospels, the Quran, and even the Buddhist sutras all agree: the enlightened are marked by their indifference to their own status. If you directly examined them, they would absolutely know, by virtue of the structural shift from actor to witness; yet such an examination would never happen, since that consciousness has surrendered the very impulse to self-assess. The answer to how you would know is therefore both simple and paradoxical: you would know if asked, but you would never ask. The question was Arjuna revealing himself to be on the path; yet, by the end of the discussion, by virtue of knowledge and revelation, he was firmly and eternally enlightened and went on to win the war that followed under the Lord's direction.

Endnotes

1. *Bhagavad Gita* 2:21.
2. *Bhagavad Gita* 2:31.
3. *Bhagavad Gita* 2:54.
4. James, pp. 380 – 382.
5. Alston, pp. 1 – 9.
6. Swinburne, pp. 303 – 315.
7. *Bhagavad Gita* 2:56 – 57. Cf. Surah Al-Hadid 57:23, on neither grieving over loss nor boasting over gain.
8. *Bhagavad Gita* 18:51 – 53. Cf. 1 Peter 5:6 – 7, on humbling oneself under the mighty hand of God and casting one's anxiety on Him.
9. *Bhagavad Gita* 18:66. Cf. Surah Al-Imran 3:159, "And when you have decided, then rely upon Allah", another formulation of total reliance.
10. *Srimad Bhagavatam* 11:11:16.
11. *Bhagavad Gita* 15:15. Cf. John 14:17, on the Spirit of truth who "lives with you and will be in you"; Surah Qaf 50:16, "We are closer to them than their jugular vein": parallel expressions of divine indwelling and proximity.
12. Garfield, pp. 110 – 112.
13. Ramanuja, *Sri Bhagavad Gita Bhasya*, ad 2:54 – 72 (on the sthitaprajna).
14. *Dhammapada* 96 (Arahantavagga), on the arahant: "Calm is his mind, calm is his speech, calm is his action – wholly freed, perfectly peaceful, and equipoised"; cf. the "stream-enterer" doctrine of the four stages of awakening (sotāpanna to arahant), in which liberation is irreversible once attained.
15. *Bhagavad Gita* 15:6: "That abode of Mine is not illumined by the sun or moon, nor by fire. One who reaches it never returns to this material world." Cf. BG 8:21, on the supreme destination as "that place from which, having attained it, one never returns"; see Ramanuja, *Sri Bhagavad Gita Bhasya*, ad 8:20-22 and 15:6, on moksha as the soul's eternal, irreversible participation in God.

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