



## CHAPTER 1

### ARJUNA'S ANGUISH *(Arjuna Vishada Yoga)*

*“Why should I wage a bloody war?...  
Death would be better for me!”*

His unseeing eyes blinked several times as he spoke to his minister Sanjaya. The blind old king, Dhritarashtra, fidgeted and cleared his throat. “Tell me, Sanjaya, what is happening on the holy plain where the mighty armies of my son, Duryodhana, and the armies of his cousin Arjuna are gathered to fight?”

The old man knew that his son Duryodhana's decision to go to war was wrong. He knew that the young king's judgment was clouded over by his jealous hate for his cousin. The old man had felt pangs of conscience but had said nothing when his son cheated Arjuna's family out of their rightful kingdom and then denied their

requests for even a trifling parcel of the land that was rightfully theirs. The old man had maintained his curious silence when his son mortified Arjuna's wife and the whole family in public by having a henchman attempt to strip her of her clothes. He didn't condemn his son's heinous attempt to assassinate Arjuna's entire family. Nor did the old man try to change his son's mind when the young king sneered at all the recent peace overtures from Arjuna's family.

Indeed, the old man was so caught up in his mindless support of his son that neither ethical nor spiritual feelings could find their way into his heart. All good judgment had been lost. An unfair and ill-conceived war was about to erupt, and though he was the only person who could at this point avert the disastrous slaughter, he had no mind to do so.

- 2 The minister Sanjaya, because of his honest character, had been granted temporary *yogic* powers to see and hear what was occurring on the distant battlefield. (Sanjaya's name means "victorious over the self.") With a steady voice he replied to the old king's question: "Your son, King Duryodhana, is now viewing for the first time Prince Arjuna's opposing army all drawn up and ready to fight. It is obviously more formidable than Duryodhana had expected and he seems a bit anxious. Your son turns to his own forces as if looking for something or someone. Almost child-like in his manner, he finds Drona, his old archery teacher, in the crowd and moves quickly to him."

Sanjaya paused and leaned toward the old man, "Why is your son running to his former teacher? Perhaps his confidence wanes, or his conscience bothers him."

The old king didn't immediately react to this, which 3  
 to Sanjaya showed that the old man's spirits were as  
 sinister as his son's. Sanjaya continued his description  
 of the distant scene: "Your son, almost flinging his  
 words at his venerable teacher, says, 'Well, Drona,  
 take a look at the army marshaled by your talented  
 disciple, Arjuna. Why did you accept him as your  
 pupil and teach him the arts of war?' The question  
 carries a taunt, implying that Drona had made a mis-  
 take years ago in tutoring this prince who is now the  
 enemy."

Sanjaya shook his head, "No one should ever speak to  
 his teacher this way; it reveals your son's nervousness."

Without waiting for the old king's reactions, Sanjaya 4-6  
 continued his account: "Your son is now mentioning  
 the names, one by one, of the noted leaders of Arjuna's  
 opposing army, some of whom were also Drona's stu-  
 dents. He is too carefully enunciating each name,  
 which is an indirect but rather obvious censuring of  
 his ex-master for the opposition's great strength.

"But now your son realizes that he has overstepped his 7-8  
 bounds and switches to listing the leaders on his own  
 side. He puts the teacher Drona at the top of his list,  
 clearly a patronizing gesture. As your son continues  
 speaking, the generals standing close by appear  
 uncomfortable with the too careful way he is voicing  
 their names."

Sanjaya waited a moment, as though continuing to 9-10  
 watch the far-off scene, and then resumed his  
 account. "Sensing his generals' discomfort, your son  
 abruptly stops. 'But we have many heroes on our  
 side,' he says, 'and they're ready to lay down their lives

for me!’ But again his words don’t fit his demeanor. There’s a forced bravado in his voice; it’s not clear whether he’s putting down his own army or the opposition’s. It’s as though your son is unwittingly spelling ruin to himself and our forces even as he attempts to put weakness on the enemy.

- 11 “He tries to rectify this, and blurts an order to his generals, ‘Go, assume your positions,’ he says and then adds, ‘But at all costs protect Field Marshal Bhishma.’ His words and manner again reveal doubts, as if he does not trust his own generals. Or perhaps his concern about protecting Bhishma, the venerable old man both sides call ‘grandfather,’ is a grasp at a semblance of righteousness for his own side.”
- 12 Sanjaya stopped talking as he watched the events unfold on the distant battlefield, and then resumed his narration: “Now, Bhishma, as if trying to cheer your son and rescue the deteriorating situation, is suddenly roaring like a lion and blowing his conch, indicating that the battle has begun!
- 13 “All the armies standing behind him have suddenly come to life, blaring forth their conches, kettle drums, cymbals, cow-horns, and trumpets. It’s a loud, tumultuous noise.
- 14-15 “Now the opposition, led by Prince Arjuna and his lifelong friend Krishna, are answering this deafening roar with long, wailing blasts on their own conches.
- 16-18 “This incites all their forces to join in trumpeting and pounding drums — a noise that fills earth and sky with reverberations. The tumult seems even greater than that of the army of your son, although Arjuna’s army is smaller.

“Like thunder, the noise of the opposition seems to tear through the hearts of your son’s armies. It’s as if the respective clamors of the two sides echoes the relative justness of their causes. The opposition’s greater commotion seems to abnormally penetrate the hearts and consciences of your forces.” 19

*Arjuna Loses His Resolve*

The old blind king squirmed in his seat, but ever-honest Sanjaya ignored it, and continued his commentary. “Your son’s blood enemy Prince Arjuna, aware that the fighting is about to begin, lifts his bow and speaks with an obvious — perhaps too obvious — zeal. ‘Krishna,’ Arjuna says, ‘place my chariot between the two armies! I want to view those who come here daring to fight for the evil-minded Duryodhana.’ 20–23

“Everyone on both sides watches as Krishna drives Arjuna’s splendid war chariot onto the open field between the two armies and positions it in front of the opposing generals. ‘Behold the gathered foes,’ Krishna says with an edge in his voice. 24–25

“Arjuna now looks long at both armies, staring especially at his paternal uncles, teachers, cousins, and various benefactors, friends, and comrades on both sides. As his eyes fall on those who are now his enemies, his attitude seems to waver and he appears confused. He begins to speak to Krishna but the words get caught in his throat. The prince collects himself and again begins, ‘Seeing my kinsmen gathered here ready to fight,’ he says, ‘all of a sudden I am overwhelmed by my emotions. 26–28

“‘My arms and legs feel heavy, Krishna. My mouth is dry and my hair stands on end — and my body is 29–30