We have seen that the Gītā is engaged in a reinterpretation of all the significant religious concepts it has inherited; the Gītā here endeavors an exegesis of sacrifice. The text acknowledges the traditional Vedic sacrifices in fire, but suggests that sacrifice is most efficacious when it is recognized that the power of the sacrifice (brahman) is the supreme spirit (brahman) we seek to reach (4.24-25). The Gītā is echoing a historical trajectory: at first, sacrifices were external, the sacrifice of animals on the fire. Then Brahmin priests saw that they could perform the sacrifice internally; one could chant mantras mentally, because sound and action can be just as potent when internalized.i Yogins discovered that one can sacrifice the object of sense experience in the fire of the senses; one can sacrifice the breath through breath control (4.26-27).ii

We recall that an ancient hymn of the Rīg Veda described the universe as created by sacrifice of a cosmic man (purusha); the forest treatises (Āraṇyakas) described the entire universe as created and sustained by sacrifice. The Gītā here extends the metaphor of sacrifice from the macrocosmic level to the microcosm. The universe is created and maintained by sacrifice; brahman priests carry out this world-maintaining activity of ritual offering. Likewise, the yogin can practice sacrifice in other areas of life. We can sacrifice the objects of our senses, by withdrawing our attachment to them; we can sacrifice our breath through breath control. In the new discipline of action (karma yoga) the Gītā is laying out, we can offer the results of our actions to the deity. All these arenas of sacrifice culminate in the knowledge of brahman we are seeking to achieve. The goal is to know that brahman is the inner essence of every element of the sacrifice and the genuine source of all creative activity.

In this suggestive passage, the Gītā integrates these rich and varied perspectives. On the one hand, we are told in 4.23 that when we perform our actions in the spirit of sacrifice, our actions are completely dissolved. Thus the original karma yoga—sacrificial action in the context of the physical action of ritual sacrifice—becomes a metaphor for the way all our actions should be performed; we are
like the traveler in the *Daodejing* whose footsteps leave no trace. On the other hand, ritual action itself can achieve the supreme spirit, *brahman*. When the priest gives up an offering on the fire, the goal is to attain *brahman*: “what is actually sacrificed is *brahman*; one attains to *brahman* by concentrating completely on the action of *brahman*. *Brahman* can be reached by contemplating the action of *brahman*.” (4.24). Thus no matter what action we do, we realize it is the action of *brahman*.iii Here the text evokes the original meaning of *brahman*, as the power of the sacrifice and the sacred utterance chanted during the sacrifice, while at the same time suggesting what the term came to evoke: the principle or spirit that sustains the universe.iv It also adumbrates the role the *Gītā* will eventually ascribe to Krishna as the sole genuine actor in the universe. The ideal stance for humans is to surrender to the one Lord of the universe, who is himself the agent of all that takes place.

The passage thus suggests a symbolic meaning to the act of sacrifice; perhaps the purpose of sacrifice is to meditate on the eternal activity of *brahman* alone. And thus, as we have seen, the original *karma yoga*—the activity of ritual sacrifice—can function also as the new type of *karma yoga*, performing an act as sacrifice without attachment to its results. The point of sacrifice is to let go of whatever the actor is attached to—whether a physical being such as an animal, or sense-objects, or the breath (4.28-30). The ultimate sacrifice is the sacrifice of knowledge (4.37-38), an ambiguous term that can be interpreted in several ways. Sacrifice of knowledge may connote sacrifice accompanied by knowledge and understanding, including knowledge of its ultimate goal, *brahman*. The text could also be suggesting that the pursuit of knowledge and understanding is itself a form of sacrifice.v Sacrifice in knowledge is better than sacrifice with material objects; the totality of all action culminates in knowledge. It seems that the text wants to insist that any practice that includes knowledge is superior to a traditional offering alone.vi Thus whether we offer a substance, or the breath, or we give up food in ascetic fasting, our offering needs knowledge as a crucial component. The *Gītā* repeatedly associates the yoga of knowledge alone (Sāṅkhya or jñāna yoga) with renunciation of all action, which it denigrates; in contrast, disinterested action accompanied by knowledge is the ideal way to act. In the words of J.A.B. Van Buitenen, “all action culminates, finds its fulfillment (*parisamapyate*), in the knowledge that accompanies
the action (4.33). In other words, from this vantage point a yoga of knowledge is really part and parcel of a yoga of acting.”vii The true new yoga of action is to act without concern for results, with the knowledge that we are the witness and not the doer. This also burns up the karmic results of the action. As Robert Minor, an astute contemporary commentator notes, referring to 4.23:

This summarizes the Gītā’s notion of how one may cope with karma. The intent is most important, for the action “melts away” or burns up (4.19, 27) in the sacrifice which is the sacrifice of knowledge, as this has been defined. What is sacrificed is the work itself, for it is done without personal interest but with correct knowledge and with Krishna as its recipient (3.30). Śankara and Rāmānuja understand karma here as only the actions, but the merit resulting therefrom.viii

Recall the Gītā’s earlier argument that we can be self-deluded hypocrites if we sit on our yoga mat in meditation thinking of sense objects. True renunciation is not renunciation of physical action, but renunciation of attachment to the fruits of action. Likewise in this passage, we learn that true sacrifice is not sacrifice with material objects, but sacrifice in knowledge, which is the consummation of all action. The point of action is not to accomplish an external goal, but to realize brahman; thus the purpose of karma yoga is to attain knowledge.ix All the actions we undertake in a teleological spirit of accomplishing goals really have one goal: knowledge of brahman and the liberation of our spirit. All our actions are just a play we are enacting whose true purpose is to discover the eternal spirits we really are.

We should notice, however, that the yoga of knowledge has been re-defined in 4.35 not as knowledge of the supreme spirit brahman, but as knowledge of Krishna: “by means of this knowledge, you will come to see fully that all beings are in yourself and thus in Me” (4.35). The fire of knowledge reduces action to ashes; knowledge frees us from the bondage of action (4.37).x Thus, there are two factors in reducing action to non-action: letting go of attachment to the results of action, and knowing that we are not the true actor, for action is done autonomously by the qualities of our human nature.xi Actions do not bind us if we renounce actions through yoga and sever doubt through knowledge; then we are in full possession of ourselves. And thus Arjuna can arise on the battlefield and act, in full possession of
himself, renouncing the fruits of his action through yoga. He can fight the battle and attain liberation through the discipline of the combined yogas of knowledge and action (4.41-42).\textsuperscript{xii}

\textsuperscript{i} See Hopkins, 36; Flood, 84.

\textsuperscript{ii} Theodor, 53; \textit{Gītā} 4.7

\textsuperscript{iii} On brahman in this context, see Zaechner, 191-2.

\textsuperscript{iv} In the Vedas, the creative power by which the seers discovered and expressed the truth was known as brahman, and the hymns themselves were said to hold this power of brahman, the power of the sacred utterance. This account of the evolution of the term brahman follows the somewhat simplified presentations of Franklin Edgerton, Gavin Flood, Thomas Hopkins, and R.C. Zaechner; for fuller explanation, see Lobel, \textit{Quest for God and the Good}. I repeat here a note from that presentation. Hopkins, who presents the original meaning of brahman as the power of the sacred utterance and the sacrifice, uses the term "brahman power" to explicate a statement from the \textit{Atharva Veda}: “Who knows the thread of the thread, he would know the great brahman [power]” (10.8.37). In this account, the meaning of brahman evolved from the power of the sacrifice and the sacred word to that passively dynamic principle that sustains the universe. See similar descriptions by Edgerton, \textit{The Bhagavad Gītā}, 116-117; Flood, 84; Zaechner, 36-56, especially 37, 47. Patrick Olivelle notes that among its many meanings, brahman may mean a formulation of truth, the Veda, or the ultimate essence of the cosmos, but “always retains its verbal character as ‘the sound expression’ of all reality.” Olivelle, lvi. For scholarly studies of the many meanings of brahman, see Jan Gonda, \textit{Notes on Brahman}; Louis Renou and Liliane Silburn “Sur la notion de “Brahman;”” Paul Thieme, ‘Brahman;”’ Hermann Oldenberg, \textit{Die Religion des Veda}. Jan Gonda traces the original meaning of the term to the root \textit{brh} “to be great,” and hence power. Hermann Oldenberg summarizes the basic meaning of brahman as the sacred formula and the power in it. Thieme traces the root meaning to forming or formulation—poetic formulation and then formulation of truth. Renou notes the context of the life-or-death riddle, a theme developed by J. C. Heesterman, who writes: ‘brahman is distinguished by its enigmatic or paradoxical nature. The brahman, then, is the formulation of the cosmic riddle, a riddle that cannot be solved by a direct answer but only formulated in paradoxical terms that leave the answer—the (hidden) connection (\textit{bandhu, nidāna}) between the terms of the paradox—unexpressed.” In Renou’s phrase, brahman is the “connective energy compressed in riddles.” (p. 43) Heesterman emphasizes the context of the brahmodya, the verbal contest, which formed part of the Vedic ritual: “It consists of a series of rounds of verbal challenges and responses. In each round two contestants put riddle questions to each other. The point of the riddle contest is to show that one has "seen" or understood the hidden "connection" by responding with a similar, if possible even more artfully contrived, riddle. The one who holds out longest and finally reduces his opponent to silence is the winner, the true brahman, holder of the hidden connection . . . the live ‘connection’ that holds together the cosmos.” As the concept of brahman evolved, “identification made it possible to concentrate the whole of the spoken and acted proceedings of the ritual in the person of the single sacrificer, who in this way internalizes the whole of the ritual, that is, the transcendent cosmic order, and so becomes identical with brahman . . . Here the development leads over to the Upanisadic doctrine of the unity of ātman, the principle of individuation or the individual "soul," and brahman, which gave rise to the monistic philosophy of the Vedānta.” The complex, multi-layered account of Heesterman thus affirms the evolution of the concept of brahman from the power of the word or verbal formulation—through the dimension of the cosmic enigma, enacted through the verbal contest and the sacrifice—to the ultimate essence underlying the cosmos. See J.C. Heesterman, “Brahman,” in \textit{Encyclopedia of Religion}; idem,
The Inner Conflict of Tradition, 71-74. For Jan Gonda’s response to Renou on the notion of the enigma, see his Notes on Brahman, 57-61.

v George Thompson, The Bhagavad Gītā: A New Translation, 93 note 9. The sacrifice of knowledge may refer to the interiorized sacrifice, the sacrifice performed within, through knowledge alone. This is Śankara’s interpretation. See Van Buitenen, 164 note 16. On the sacrifice of knowledge, see also Malinar, 102-108, 223.

vi Minor thus summarizes that action must be done without attachment to the results, as a sacrifice “leading to enlightenment and for Krishna,” with the knowledge that the self does not act, and is eternally separate from prakṛiti, which is the locus of action. Minor, 176.

vii Van Buitenen, 22. If we broaden the concept of sacrifice to think of it as an offering, the offering of knowledge can be the greatest gift we can give. Easwaran, The Bhagavad Gītā for Daily Living: the End of Sorrow, 277. See a similar theme in Dogen, below, 9.

viii He adds: “It must be remembered that karma does always imply, in the Gītā, not merely the actions but the fruit resulting from them in this life or future births.” Robert N. Minor, Bhagavad Gītā: An Exegetical Commentary, 165

ix As the text moves on, the Gītā will imbue knowledge with the devotional flavor of bhakti.

x Gītā 4.37. See Theodor, 52-3; Dermot Killingley, “Desire (kama) and the BhagavadGītā,” in The Fruits of our Desiring, 76.

xi J.A. B. Van Buitenen notes that Krishna doesn’t show any interest in the distinction between these two facets. See Van Buitenen, The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahabharata: Text and Translation, 23.

xii Theodor also makes the following intriguing suggestion, that “the sacrifice may also metaphorically represent the forthcoming battle; accordingly, the battleground may be perceived as a huge sacrificial arena, and fighting the war as a sacrificial activity.” Theodor, 530.

It might be useful here to re-contextualize the Gītā’s teaching on action and sacrifice within the Indian conception of action. The term action (karma) derives from the root k-r, which means to act, do or bring about. Some linguists even connect this Indo-European root to the English word ceremony, which has both a sacred dimension—ritual acts prescribed according to norms—and a social dimension, acts that keep the world running smoothly. These two dimensions are present in the Hindu concept as well, and are related to the Hindu concept of dharma, the action that keeps the world functioning (see above, note 6). In the Vedic context, karma was sacrificial action; karma yoga was the performance of sacrifice for the maintenance of the world. It was originally believed that the gods were free to accept or reject sacrificial gifts and respond as they pleased. Over time the ritual came to be seen as autonomous; if the priest performed the ritual correctly, the gods were forced to respond. Thus the concept of karma gradually became detached from the ritual context and came to be seen as an impersonal and autonomous system of cause and effect. All actions have powerful effects and reap rewards, whether in this life or the next.

The Upanishads envision two paths to afterlife reward: the way of the fathers, for those who performed rituals with hopes of material rewards, leads to rebirth on earth; the way of the gods, for those who renounce worldly rewards and practice ascetically does not lead to earthly rebirth. In the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad, the source of reward is extended from the realm of ritual, sacrificial action to all action: “truly one becomes good through good action, bad by bad.” (Br U 3.2.13; see William Mahoney, Karman: Hindu and Jain Concepts, 261-66.)
In the sacrificial context of the early period of the Vedas, an act (*karman*) ensured the stability of the deity and the world order governed by that deity, but could also fulfill one’s personal desires. In the period of the *Brahmanas*, the act of sacrifice came to take on an autonomous role in creating and sustaining the cosmos. The deity loses importance and the priest who offers the sacrifice grows in importance; the priest has the ability to release the power of *brahman*—the sacred word that makes the sacrifice efficacious. Speculation thus arose as to the self of the *brahman* performing the sacrifice. Who was the real performer who held this power of *brahman*? Thus, the individual self (*atman*) of the priest was identified with this universal *brahman* power. Moreover, if the act of sacrifice is so powerful, perhaps the power of such acts carries over from lifetime to lifetime: the importance of *karma* as determining the facts of one’s existence grew. At the same time, heterodox traditions such as Buddhism challenged the importance of the Vedic priests; the Buddha taught a path to the release from suffering that did not require the mediation of the ritual actions of *brahman* priests. These heterodox movements, which emphasized renunciation of the world of action, also influenced orthodox *Brahmanism*, which accepted the importance of renunciation for the achievement of personal liberation, while maintaining that the world itself needed the class of *brahmans* to maintain the stability of the world order. This is the background for the *Gītā*’s rethinking of the role of action.