# Different contextual meanings of ‘brahman’ from Bhagavad Gītā - As It Is

In the glossary of Bhagavad Gītā As It Is, Srila Prabhupada includes 4 different meanings of ‘brahman’ as follows:

1. the individual soul
2. the impersonal, all-pervasive aspect of the Supreme
3. the Supreme Personality of Godhead
4. the mahat-tattva, or total material substance

Following is an analysis of verses from Bhagavad Gita, highlighting the various contexts in which ‘brahman’ is used.

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| 1 | the individual soul | 4.24, 7.29, 8.3, 13.13 |
| 2 | the impersonal, all-pervasive aspect of the Supreme | 4.24, 4.25, 4.30, 14.27, 18.54 |
| 3 | the Supreme Personality of Godhead | 8.13, 17.23 |
| 4 | the mahat-tattva, or total material substance | 14.3 |

[BG 4.24](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/4/24/) contains 6 occurrences of brahman. The first 2 meanings are evident from this verse. The jīva (individual spirit soul) making the offering in called brahman (brahmaṇā hutam). Note that this is different from brāhmaṇa (one of the 4 varṇas). The impersonal all-pervasive aspect (brahman) is the destination of such a spirit soul (brahma eva tena gantavyam).

[BG 4.25](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/4/25/) refers to brahman as the impersonal feature of the Supreme Lord, as is clear from the explanation given by Śrīla Prabhupāda in his purport – “But there are others also, who perform similar sacrifices in the worship of demigods, and still others who sacrifice to the Supreme Brahman, or the impersonal feature of the Supreme Lord”.

[BG 4.30](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/4/30/) clearly states the destination of the jñāna yogis as the impersonal brahman. Śrīla Prabhupāda calls it the supreme eternal atmosphere in the translation. In the purport he mentions the aspect of one’s merging into the impersonal brahman (though the individual identity is maintained – see [BG 18.55](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/18/55/) purport for a clear explanation by Śrīla Prabhupāda).

[BG 7.29](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/7/29/) refers to brahman as the living entity. te brahma tad viduḥ kṛtsnam - They are actually Brahman because they entirely know everything about transcendental activities. Śrīla Prabhupāda mentions in the purport – “ahaṁ brahmāsmi: I am spirit. It is said that one should understand that he is Brahman, spirit soul”. In the next para he writes – “Only persons who perform activities in Kṛṣṇa consciousness (mām āśritya) are actually entitled to be called Brahman, because they are actually endeavoring to reach the Kṛṣṇa planet. Such persons have no misgivings about Kṛṣṇa, and thus they are factually Brahman”.

[BG 8.3](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/8/3/) also refers to brahman as the living entity. akṣaraṁ brahma paramaṁ is translated by Śrīla Prabhupāda as “the indestructible transcendental living entity is called Brahman”. In the purport he further clarifies – “Brahman refers to the living entity, and Parabrahman refers to the Supreme Personality of Godhead”. He further writes in the same purport – “In Vedic literature the living entity is called jīvātmā and Brahman, but he is never called Para-brahman”.

[BG 8.13](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/8/13/) refers to brahman as the Supreme Personality of Godhead. The translation by Śrīla Prabhupāda is – “if one thinks of the Supreme Personality of Godhead and quits his body, he will certainly reach the spiritual planets”. He writes clearly in the purport – “It is clearly stated here that oṁ, Brahman and Lord Kṛṣṇa are not different”.

More analysis on [BG 8.13](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/8/13/): Even for one who likes to argue on technicalities, the contextual meaning in [BG 8.13](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/8/13/) as being Supreme Personality of Godhead is indisputable. Just a few verses earlier Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa says in the famous verse [BG 8.5](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/8/5/) – “anta-kāle ca mām eva smaran muktvā kalevaram...”, where He says that one who remembers Me (i.e. bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa) alone...attains My nature. Then a little bit later in another famous verse BG [8.21](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/8/21/) He says – “yaṁ prāpya na nivartante tad dhāma paramaṁ mama”, i.e. that supreme abode on Mine (dhāma paramaṁ mama) is the supreme destination (paramāṁ gatim). And that same supreme destination (paramāṁ gatim) is referred in [BG 8.13.](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/8/13/) So how can brahman in [BG 8.13](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/8/13/) refer to anything or anyone else than the Supreme Personality of Godhead Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa?

[BG 13.13](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/13/13/) also refers to brahman as the individual soul. Śrīla Prabhupāda clearly mentions this in his purport – “Therefore the description of Brahman mentioned in this verse is in relation to the individual soul, and when the word Brahman is applied to the living entity, it is to be understood that he is vijñāna-brahma as opposed to ānanda-brahma. Ānanda-brahma is the Supreme Brahman Personality of Godhead”.

[BG 14.3](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/14/3/) refers to the fourth meaning of barhman (mahad brahma). Śrīla Prabhupāda translates this as – “The total material substance, called Brahman”. Śrīla Prabhupāda elaborates further in his purport – “This total material substance, the mahat-tattva, is described as Brahman in the Vedic literature (Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 1.1.19): tasmād etad brahma nāma-rūpam annaṁ ca jāyate. The Supreme Person impregnates that Brahman with the seeds of the living entities. The twenty-four elements, beginning from earth, water, fire and air, are all material energy, and they constitute what is called mahad brahma, or the great Brahman, the material nature”.

[BG 14.27](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/14/27/) is a famous verse that establishes the supremacy of Bhagavān (ahaṁ) over His impersonal all-pervasive aspect (brahman). In this verse, brahman means the impersonal brahma-jyotir (as given by Śrīla Prabhupāda in the synonyms).

[BG 17.23](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/17/23/) refers to the Supreme (bramaṇaḥ) as being indicated by three words - oṁ tat sad. In this context the occurrence of brahman refers to the Supreme Personalilty of Godhead. Śrīla Prabhupāda makes this abundantly clear in his purport – “These three words, oṁ tat sat, particularly indicate the Absolute Truth, the Supreme Personality of Godhead”. One should also understand that this occurrence is almost at the end of the Bhagavad Gitā, when Lord Kṛṣṇa has clearly established his Bhagavān aspect to be the topmost ([BG 7.6](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/7/6/) – I am the source of both the lower material energies and higher spiritual energy i.e. the jivas, [BG 10.8](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/10/8/) – I am the source of everything, [BG 14.27](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/14/27/) – I am the basis of the impersonal brahman). So if Lord Kṛṣṇa is giving three words to indicate the Supreme Absolute Truth, they ought to refer to the bhagavān aspect, not the other 3 meanings – the impersonal all-pervading brahman aspect, the jīva, or the material energy.

[BG 18.54](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/18/54/) is a very famous verse often quoted in the context of impersonal liberation (i.e. brahma-bhūta stage) or becoming one with the impersonal all-pervading aspect of the Supreme Lord. Śrīla Prabhupāda notes in his purport – “To the impersonalist, achieving the brahma-bhūta stage, becoming one with the Absolute, is the last word”.

## Chapter 5 references to the term brahman:

There are several references to brahman in BG chapter 5, but they have been translated by Śrīla Prabhupāda as Kṛṣṇa consciousness, the Supreme, transcendence, or Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Hence, they are not referred to above, so as to remain technically accurate with respect to English translation of the specific terms. Specifically in BG 5.10 Śrīla Prabhupāda refers to brahman in the synonyms as Supreme Personality of Godhead, but in the purport he says that brahmaṇi means in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Other verses in which brahman occurs are [5.6](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/5/6/), [5.19](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/5/19/), [5.20](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/5/20/), [5.21](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/5/21/), [5.24](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/5/24/), [5.25](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/5/25/), and [5.26](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/5/26/).

## Additional Notes:

[BG 10.12](https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/10/12/) is not used in this analysis (as an occurrence of the 3rd meaning – the Supreme Personality of Godhead) due to a technicality in this verse that Arjuna refers to the Supreme Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa as paraṁ brahma, not just brahman.