

The Yogas

The Gita mentions four Yogas or pathways to enlightenment (the term `yoga' connotes joining or linking, so Yoga is a way of joining or linking ourselves with God). These are:

- The Yoga of Mysticism and Philosophy (*Jnana Yoga*)
- The Yoga of Action (*Karma Yoga*)
- The Yoga of Meditation (*Raja Yoga*)
- The Yoga of Devotion (*Bhakti Yoga*)

The Gita does not mention *Hatha Yoga*, which is what we westerners think of when we think of Yoga, a practice involving bodily and breathing exercises. But in fact Hatha Yoga plays a central role in each of the four Yogas mentioned above.

Krishna introduces Jnana Yoga in Book III but he does not dwell upon it extensively as the other three forms. Jnana Yoga is a mystic practice, suitable for priests and the 'forest dwellers,' but not terribly well suited for Arjuna and the rest of us.

Karma Yoga is the Yoga of Selfless or Detached Action. We talked a bit about this in class. The aim is to divorce yourself from the consequences of your actions so you do not perform them for your own benefit, whether material or spiritual. You offer up your action as a gift to God. And you perform the action simply because it is the correct thing to do. In this way you avoid accumulating karma. Note that this is a response to the Jainists and Buddhists who advocate avoiding all forms of action. Krishna would say (no doubt) that doing this simply avoids the problem. It is one thing to avoid accumulating karma by ceasing to act. It is another, and much better thing, to avoid accumulating karma while still acting. Here's a parallel: Compare *avoiding* temptation (you don't put yourself in situations where you are tempted) with *overcoming* temptation (you do get tempted but you do not yield to temptation). It seems better to be able to overcome temptation rather than to merely avoid it, knowing we would succumb if we were tempted. Likewise, the thought is, it is better to act and yet avoid karma, than to cease acting.

Raja Yoga is the Yoga of meditation. Krishna describes it in Book 6 of the Gita.

Krishna's description of Bhakti Yoga sounds rather akin to certain passages of the New Testament. There is an emphasis on a personalized loving relationship between human and God.

Note that the three (four) Yogas are not incompatible. They are different paths to the same place. Indeed, one will need to practice each of them to truly achieve enlightenment. But the greatest of the Yogas is Bhakti Yoga, the Yoga of devotion. (cf book 12 of the Gita, in particular verse 20). The Gita preaches meditation, selflessness, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Which brings us to the *gunas*....