Jnana, Bhakti and Karma Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita - written between 600-500 BCE is sometimes referred to as the last Upanishad. It is grounded by the transcendent inner message of the Upanishads but extends this into other aspects of yoga and living life through bhakti yoga and karma yoga. Ultimately it is a text that describes how yoga can clarify our perception of life and its challenges, and offers guidance as to how we might negotiate them. It encourages full engagement with life, and its difficulties and dilemmas are turned into the manure for liberation and freedom.

The Bhagavad-Gita is actually a sub story contained within a huge poem/story called the Mahabharata, one of the ‘Puranas’ or epics that make up much of early Indian literature. It emphasises the importance of engagement in the world, perhaps a reaction to the tendency developing at the time in Buddhism and Vedanta to renounce worldly life. The Yoga of the Bhagavad-Gita essentially suggests that fully engaging in all aspects of life and its challenges with a clear perspective is a valid spiritual path and possibly superior to meditative realisation alone. There is an implication in this emphasis that there is a potential danger inherent in yoga of using its practice and lifestyle to avoid difficulties in life and not engage properly with the world and the culture and time we find ourselves in. The apparent ‘Indianness’ of its context contains some ideas that are alien to us, but once we take them out its essential message is timeless and in many ways a good match for western culture with our tendency towards pragmatism and activity.

The story

The Mahabharata is essentially a story of two warring factions that is likely to be at least partly based in historical fact. Very basically, two extended families, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, are related as first cousins, uncles and brothers and through convoluted circumstances they grew up together in one palace. The Kauravas, through deceit and trickery, took temporary control of land to which the Pandavas were rightfully heirs, with the Pandavas going into temporary exile. When the Pandavas came out of exile, the Kauravas refused to hand back the kingdom rightfully owed to them; this is how the main battleground setting of the Bhagavad-Gita arose.

The central human character of the story is Arjuna, an esteemed warrior of the Pandavas. The Pandavas are supported by the other main character, Krishna, an ‘avatar’ (human manifestation of the Divine) who recognises the injustice of what has happened. Krishna has tried all means of mediation and reconciliation with the Kauravas before the story reaches a point where the two sides are facing each other on the battlefield.

Before battle commences, Arjuna, who has Krishna as his chariot driver, has a dark night of the soul episode whereby the sight of his relatives on the opposing side weakens his will to fight. This presents a dilemma of the damned if you do and damned if you don’t variety. Krishna (with of course the advantage of being all seeing and all knowing) begins to explain the true nature of the situation in order to persuade Arjuna to fight. He begins with earthy types of persuasion before moving on to spiritual teachings and how yoga practice will help him gain the perspective and courage to do what he needs to do. So begins a dialogue between the two which in essence is Krishna explaining the teaching and practice of Yoga to Arjuna so that he gains a clear and complete perspective of the true context of the situation and the relationship between spiritual insight and action in the world; thus he regains the
courage to fight and can fulfil his dharma (that which he was born to do and is the right thing to do in the context of the eternal law – see p.5).

The dialogue and relationship between inner awareness and outer action is the key theme in the Bhagavad-Gita. Krishna can be seen as the Atman of Arjuna that keeps prompting him to action through the murkiness of his confusion; a symbolic representation of the struggle of the human soul in daily living in terms of how we make choices and on what basis.

Not fighting represents something like the equivalent of taking the easy way out in life (the right thing is not always the easy thing), avoiding issues or generally sticking ones heads in the proverbial sand. Choosing to fight represents something like a willingness to stand up and face yourself and life fully, especially all the awkward and knobbly bits. The implication being that acting in alignment with truth will make you stronger and more whole and forms an essential part of a valid yogic path.

There is a distinct danger for some people that yoga and meditative practices can cause a withdrawal from engaging with life, an opposite problem from obsessive busyness – although this can also be a tactic to avoid important decisions and actions with the culturally valid excuse of ‘I am just too busy’. For a few people intensive practice and withdrawal is an appropriate choice if it is a decision made fully conscious of the implications, but for some it can cause more problems than it solves. Better perhaps are shorter periods of retreat and withdrawal to really experience the depths practice. The BG is largely advocating a balance between contemplative practices and engagement in the world.

The book raises questions about Yoga as a way of life and how daily living is the yogic path as much as, if not more so, than formal practice. If not what is the practice for? Arjuna asks Krishna this question – how does yoga affect people? How are they in the world? Even if we think that we primarily practice yoga for health and well-being, then in the wider picture that must include a healthy and stress reducing attitude towards the challenges of daily life.

**Cultural Issues relating to the historical and Indian context.**

There are some difficult ideas that crop up in the Bhagavad-Gita that contain cultural and religious assumptions (and perhaps political interference) that existed and still exist in India and Hinduism. Arguably the main one is the idea of an immortal soul that reincarnates with previous life tendencies attached which is interlinked with the idea of carrying out your duty (dharma) as determined by the status of your family of birth i.e. the caste system. These are at best awkward to the western liberal educated mind, but the issues raised by them do not need to affect the central timeless message of the Bhagavad-Gita which at its heart deals with the existential matter of how to live in alignment with truth, and at ease and in harmony with yourself and society.

As with many Yoga texts and great literature there are layers of meaning in the BG. The book raises questions about Yoga as a way of life and how daily living is the path as much as, if not more so, than formal practice. In many ways the path of Yoga prescribed by the Bhagavad-Gita is more suited to our western culture than some of the more apparently renunciate type practices as its essential message is about acting in the world from an enlightened perspective (and we are a culture of doers). If we are renouncing anything it is selfishly motivated action and endlessly trying to manipulate the world to our advantage.
The teachings of Yoga are contained in the story through Krishna’s explanations to Arjuna and their dialogue. Yoga practices were not written down in a more systematic way until Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras some time later. This may be an advantage for some as arguably certain truths can only be fully communicated through storytelling and poetry as this is arguably the language that speaks to the heart/soul. Analytic philosophy has its place and is important for clarity and coherence but can it give the full flavour of the heart of Yoga?

The central dilemma

In essence, Arjuna’s dilemma is that he may have to kill relatives, some of whom he has no personal quarrel with, to correct an injustice. Clearly it would be a difficult thing to do and it is not immediately obviously the right thing to. The context was probably chosen because of its extreme nature and thankfully not something most of us will have to deal with, but as an allegory for the dilemmas of life it works. He is probably wondering if it is all worth it and that maybe it would be best just to let the Kingdom go.... On the other hand this would give victory to evil doing and trickery and where would they stop? (A not dissimilar dilemma existed at the beginning of the 2nd World War)

After failing to persuade Arjuna to fight using conventional arguments, Krishna goes on to explain the teaching of Yoga; he speaks of Brahman and Atman as being infinite and eternal, therefore no one in their true essence will die (personally I find this a dubious aspect of the Gita in that in the wrong fundamentalist hands it falls into similar territory of suicide bombers thinking they will go to heaven – I’m assuming that you have joined me in the ‘don’t know’ camp as regards reincarnation and the transmigration of souls). More importantly he continues to explain the nature of Brahman/Atman, or the inner life of the heart/soul (by reference to himself), and how through Yoga practices it is possible to gain direct knowledge of your Self or core of our being. He then continues to explain how it is possible to act in the world through this understanding and inner listening to the heart and to live out our Dharma (Dharma is essentially carrying out our moral duty ‘due to the way of things’ – in the context of our profession or job it’s doing the right thing by other people in response to whatever happens; again more on p. 5).

Krishna is saying that there is a moral imperative to act in accordance with truth, however inconvenient that is, and that this is the right thing to do karmically in the long run. It is through yogic insight that Arjuna regains the conviction that to fight is the right thing to do and carries with him an enlightened fearless perspective. He understands his dharma (as a warrior) and that the underlying injustice of the situation demands action.

The yoga teachings

Three main types of Yoga practice are discussed and taught by Krishna to inspire Arjuna and to give him an enlightened perspective and the courage to carry out his convictions; they exist as paths on their own but practiced together are a mutually supportive combination. Hatha yoga as we know it is not mentioned but the skills involved in an intelligent asana practice and the ability to listen to body messages and responses are a useful element of a yogic path both on and off the mat.

Jnana Yoga - The yoga of wisdom or direct insight in the true nature of things and the implication of that understanding gained by formal yoga practice and study. Whilst ultimate understanding and truth in Yoga is considered to be non conceptual and beyond language, arguably there is a direct counterpart in clear reasoning that arises out of the understanding.
The fact that reason is included as important helps protect against faulty intuition distorted by fantasy, fanaticism and other delusions; and avoids intellectual laziness. It also correlates with my own experience that, seemingly paradoxically, a meditation practice grounded in non-conceptual awareness seems to sharpen incisive and analytical thinking.

2. **Bhakti Yoga** - the yoga of unconditional love/acceptance and the yoga of the heart. If Brahman unifies all of life, then Love is the binding principle or the ‘stuff’ of Brahman (Love is the answer, we all know that! What was the question?). Unconditional love/acceptance comes without expectations or strings attached. The suspension of judgement of others is an essential part of this. Can we try to see people in their true light, for who they really are beyond their roles, behaviours and posturing? How do we really want to be seen? In many ways much of this can be seen as the practice of cultivating friendships and noticing how we relate to others generally and how they respond to us. If we do this consciously it is an interesting addition to our yoga practice.

Bhakti is arguably an internal attitude that could be awakened in many ways. In traditional Indian yoga there are various devotional practices to open the heart and awaken joy. There is chanting and devotional singing and dancing - the Hare Krishnas being a traditional example.

3. **Karma Yoga** - Krishna states that renunciation alone is not enough, there is no choice but to act and live in the world (not acting would be a choice and an act anyway). Therefore we try to learn to act without attachment or without expectations of something in return for our actions. We attempt to act in alignment with our understanding of truth. True karma yoga means we act with such awareness that there are no more negative consequences arising from our actions – with correctly aligned intentions we create no more karma.

This approach helps counter a very human tendency of trying to imagine the results of our actions, raising our hopes about them, grasping after them and perhaps then to try to excessively control and manipulate life to achieve them. Whilst all of this is understandable it is also arguably a significant source of stress. Events rarely go as we imagined they would, and being over pushy and manipulative rarely turns out well, both in terms of how we feel and the response we get from the world. If we are over attached to our expectations we are likely to be disappointed at least some of the time. Conversely if we can let go of this dynamic we experience release and ease in life; there is no harm in setting targets and goals in life, but we can take out the expectations for reward. We do whatever it is because it is right to do it and let go of the outcome. Selflessness is more in our interests! It is also a call to attempt to live in the present, with life being an act of conscious service, a dialogue between our inner life and outer actions in the world.

‘For concentration is better than mere practice, and meditation is better than concentration; but higher than meditation is surrender in love of the fruits of one’s actions, for on surrender follows peace’

B.G. Chapter 12 Verse 12

**Jnana – Bhakti – Karma** joins up as the sometimes-quoted ‘Light, love and life.’
In essence the Bhagavad-Gita is asking us to understand through Jnana Yoga, awaken love, joy and connection with others through Bhakti Yoga and act and live unselfishly, positively and creatively though Karma Yoga.

To clarify a sometimes unfortunate (even disastrous) misunderstanding regarding service, it means that we need to consider ourselves equal number one in the equation – NOT – others as more important and ourselves as the door mat. If we have the tendency to allow ourselves to be walked on, we need to get clear about this. People who are burning out in their lives or jobs have not understood this. In order to be useful to others we need to be healthy, strong and centred ourselves. If we consider the example of Ghandi, whose inspiration was the Bhagavad Gita, much of his strength for his social work was based on his yoga practice and his ideal of Satya Graha – or the force of truth.

In the BG Krishna implies that a combination of Karma and Bhakti Yoga is the highest path of Yoga, though in order to live this we likely need the support of a more formal Yoga Practice (Jnana Yoga, Hatha Yoga etc). Hatha Yoga, although alluded to only occasionally, arguably has an important place in this as we learn through the body/mind skilled action in relation to the natural laws of gravity and breath and feeling without imposing will and ego. Through Hatha Yoga we can learn what an easeful embodied state feels like and what constitutes it. Chapter 13 of the B.G. is devoted to the idea of the body as a ‘field’ implying that a full exploration of embodied existence is part of the path. In particular when making decisions and dealing with dilemmas the tradition is to look to the experience of sensations in the body and whether they are easeful or not as guide to what is the right decision. The right decision in yogic terms is the one that leaves us at ease with ourselves, others and the wider world. In addition the health and vigour that Hatha Yoga can provide means we feel strong enough to face life in the spirit of Arjuna on the battlefield. Joining together the dots we may start to see the possibility of a natural law at work (of actions and consequences on all levels, physical, mental, moral, spiritual – Karma) with an underlying truth behind it. If we can live in alignment with that truth then the implication is that we will be truly happy and peaceful.

Dharma – has various meanings. In this context it means ‘to uphold’ – a moral imperative to uphold that which is true to our highest nature. In more common language it could be described as ‘The Right Thing to Do’ – most people do understand what this is even if they may be pulled in other directions they later regret at times.

In relation to our profession or job, the nearest modern equivalent would be professional ethics – which usually amounts to doing the right thing by other people in any given context – in the case of Arjuna his position as a warrior/archer.

A traditional interpretation of dharma in India has been that it is your duty to fulfil the role that you inherit through your family of birth. This is backed up with an arguably crude version of Karma; where you are born in life is a direct consequence of previous actions in a past life, and you have to accept it and there is no way to move out of it. This forms the essence of the caste system and its workings. To the western liberal mind, and increasingly the modern Indian mind, this is clearly unacceptable and against basic human rights. Scholars have debated the meaning of dharma and what truer interpretations may be. Some have argued that the more abusive version of the caste system was not the intended outcome of the idea of the term dharma, but mainly a tool of social control, also reflecting early forms of racism in India as different groups came together.
Another interpretation has suggested that all jobs in society have to be done by someone but if there is mutual respect and support throughout the system it can seem more reasonable. This view tends to suggest that there a may once have been a golden age of village India where this was the case (?

We can of course consider our own societal structures and how much of it has been ordered through money, family backgrounds, prejudices and existence of institutions that appear to perpetuate inequalities. Maybe the caste system is just the Indian version of the injustices that crop up everywhere.

More positive interpretations of the term include the idea that the B.G. invites us to discover our own personal dharma (Svadharma) - that which we are born to do. So again the B.G. is a call to action. Is there something that we seem to have an inherent aptitude for that we are inspired by, or at least content doing? This probably more appealing idea seems to hold resonance for many people who ‘feel’ that there is something they were ‘born to do’ and are happy if they have found it or discontented if they haven’t. The negative aspect to this interpretation is that it could lead to endless searching and discontentment.

The choices we make in this area can be positively or negatively influenced by our birth family – many of us make ‘wrong choices’ (or choices that don’t make us happy) due to perceived social or family expectations. (It’s interesting to reflect that some people are grateful to their parents for allowing/guiding them to find their dharma, whilst some feel they have had to go against parental wishes to find their way, whilst some just have to make it up as they go along). It would seem that we need a degree of ‘self knowledge’ to make the ‘right’ decisions and then the courage and tenacity to trust the intuition and follow it through. It generally seems in life that if we are following the right path, with the right intentions, things usually work out for us (along with the necessary hard work). The flip side being that if a project/profession/relationship is always uphill relentlessly, and doesn’t ‘feel right’, we would need to look again at whether we pursued that path with either a mistaken view of ourselves or skewed intentions. This view generally supports the arguably more sophisticated view of karma as refined cause and effect on the moral level.

Another useful interpretation of dharma and duty in relation to the BG is that if we accept our station in life, including profession, however we got there, and do it to the best of our ability, with love and without concern for the outcomes, then this will foster contentment rather than ceaseless striving and wandering about what to do (The previous interpretation could lead to this for some). There will always be times when we have no choice to do things we may feel we don’t really want to, but we do have a choice about our attitude as we go about it. Or ‘If you don’t only have to do what you like, then you are free to like what you do’...

Arjuna’s Dharma was as a warrior, he had been trained for this and excelled at it, which is partly why Krishna encouraged him in battle; he just needed the Yogic understanding for it to make sense. In many ways it was the fulfilment of his purpose or dharma.

Other yogic terms in the BG

In the BG Purusha – is essentially another word for Brahman.
Prakriti – is introduced in the B.G. as being 'the field'. It is essentially the material world on many levels of subtlety including both potentiality and the activities of the mind. The three Gunas; Sattva, Rajas and Tamas are the three energetic dynamics of Prakriti, and are responsible in part for clouding our view of Brahman. We all have these three characteristics as part of our make-up. Sattva is clarity and balance in how we live which gives us the best possibility to realise Brahman/Atman. Rajas is heat stimulated activity and desire, which, when excessive, means we are too busy and stuck in the whirlwind mind to practice yoga and realise Brahman/Atman. Tamas is sluggish and confused which means we are too unclear and unmotivated to practice Yoga and realise Atman/Brahman. These terms are often used to describe food types and eating and living habits in yoga – when we live closest to Sattvic ideals this is effectively the same as having a balanced lifestyle. We may be one type predominantly, but all the types are in us and are influenced by lifestyle and environmental stimulus and our response to it.

For example:

Sattva – eating sensibly and not too much, practicing yoga and conscious living.
Rajas – Double expressos, never sit down – contrive to make ourselves busy all the time

In Conclusion the Bhagavad-Gita represents an integration of ideas and spiritual insights from the Upanishads and brings them into action in the world. The nature and qualities of truth and how to live it are explained more expansively through an investigation into the dynamics of Karma and Bhakti Yoga. Beyond that, at times Krishna is suggesting Karma and Bhakti Yoga is a superior path to formal yoga practice (this may come as a relief to reluctant meditators, but a challenge to those over inclined to the cushion!). Yoga practice though provides the basis or support for enlightened action, and is discussed extensively.

Meditating, establish ourselves in being and then acting will help us become more balanced and able to go about our daily lives with more equanimity and discernment. We will feel less tossed around by the external events of our lives and emotional entangled in the outcome of our intentions and actions.

INQUIRY QUESTIONS

Below are some general points for inquiry on a personal level – consider these for yourself and your response to them in relation to the notes and the book you have read and we will use some of them as the basis for our class discussion.

If we take the Yogic view of the Bhagavad-Gita to be in essence living and acting in the world without attachment to outcome, motivated by Love and an understanding of the oneness of life, then we can ask ourselves some questions of the implications of this yogic view and attitude for our formal yoga practice, daily life situations and how we live....

We can consider that certain types of tendencies and attitudes have big impact in determining our state of being. Learning to take note and being fully conscious of our
intentions and expectations as we go about life will clearly help us. We can learn to note if we worry excessively about outcomes of events in relation to our own gain, what we do or don’t want, our need for approval and any control tendencies.

We can consider the dynamics of stress - wanting an outcome of our actions to be a certain way, or not a certain way within a certain time frame; the tendency to try to manipulate life and those around us to suit our own ends and the grief that causes us along the way and when things don’t work out or blow up in our faces. An awareness of this dynamic as we are going along may help us make better choices and be more easeful.

In relation to Arjuna’s dilemma and less extreme moral dilemmas that we face on a regular basis we can consider that it is often more stress inducing not to act when we know we should - and often we know what we should do – it’s just that sometimes what we must do is difficult or likely to lead to a confrontation that is likely to be uncomfortable in the short term. Similarly not to act in response to a clear injustice creates tension at the time or remorse afterwards. These scenarios put our fear and confusion uncomfortably in our faces, but are also potential times for growth.

We can Reflect on and take a special interest in our interactions with people and the types of responses we get depending on our attitude/intentions. E.G. We all know what it feels like when someone just wants something from us - even if they are trying to be subtle about it – or if we are about to go down that road ourselves. We can also take joy in the cultivation of our friendships.

We can consider that if we always seek approval from others this is a source of unease. If the only approval we need is that provided by knowing we have acted in alignment with yogic principles, then we need not be worrying about what other people think of us. This can be a great relief and source of ease. And if we haven’t acted well then we will generally know it and can take steps to apologise or whatever is necessary.

We can consider our Yoga teaching and how we approach this. If we are financially dependent on Yoga teaching, we need to note the impact this has on our attitude and intentions towards it.

We can also consider what the BG has to say about yoga teaching in relation to dharma (Arjuna’s is that of the warrior – he has to live as a warrior in response to what life presents) - that it is better to live your own destiny imperfectly than to live an imitation of somebody else’s life with perfection. What would be our dharma as yoga teachers?

We can also consider our yoga practice and whether we tend to avoid it or procrastinate and the possible reasons why.

We can consider how we deal with difficult ethical dilemmas where there is no clear right way to go? What is there to go on? Which aspect of us holds the answers? How do we get in touch with it? Interestingly a traditional view on this is that the answers are to be found in the body – this again throws up the importance of hatha yoga as a way of becoming fully embodied. The tradition is that we can ask the necessary question to ourselves and when we come up with certain answers the body’s ease or unease helps to guide us as to whether these are good answers or not. In traditional yoga the suggestion would be that these
messages are coming from the more subtle layers of our esoteric body. An interesting modern scientific answer comes from the Biologist and atheist Richard Dawkins who suggests that somehow our morality is built into our physiology.

**Philosophical questions that arise**

In philosophy both East and West an ever present issue is the Free will and Determinism debate. Is there such a thing as completely free choice – or are we conditioned on so many levels through ego, family, society and culture that total freedom is impossible? The B.G. through Krishna, is suggesting that there is a degree of determinism whilst we are still working our way through Karma (i.e. certain types of situations will necessarily arise or reoccur and certain states of mind will repeatedly engulf us due to our conditioning. This is traditionally referred to as Karmic ‘seeds’ ripening). Perhaps there is free will when we generate no more Karma – i.e. live entirely in alignment with truth. Perhaps there are only degrees of free will depending on our level of awareness in any one moment...

**The Yoga of the Bhagavad-Gita forms a good basis for social/political activism?** The B.G. was one of Gandhi’s 5 possessions (stick, flip flops, glasses, dhoti and B.G.) Gandhi’s non-violent direct action against the British was based on his conviction in the power of Satyagraha - the ‘force of Truth’ - against injustice. There are clear parallels with Arjuna’s choice – and clearly a non-violent approach is best when possible.

**Is non-violence always possible? Is violence always wrong?**

It was probably more possible for someone like Ghandi to pursue non-violence in the context that he did than for Europeans to have done the same against Hitler and others who basically imprisoned and/or shot people such as Ghandi. The scene of the B.G. is repeated throughout the world regularly, and it doesn’t always appear that truth and justice prevail (At least in the short term).

An example is the Tibetan situation whereby the Dalai Lama and the exiled government are committed to a Ghandian approach – but not all Tibetans agree with them. Some Tibetan Buddhist stories include outcomes where someone is killed to save many others.

Is it right to kill someone to save many others?

Is there such a thing as a ‘just war’?

Perhaps the questions also involve whether we are looking for short term or long term solutions?

**Dharma and Svadharma (personal dharma) -** What do you think about these concepts and the different forms of interpretation and issues that they raise?

**How important is it to rationalise spiritual insight/intuition before acting?** What is your experience of this?

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**Source Reading**