

My Gita course begins each chapter with a brief summary of its content:

I Arjuna's Dialectical Conflict – Arjuna Vishada Yoga

The Bhagavad Gita opens on the verge of a huge war between two factions of a family that represents all of humanity. One side, including Arjuna the warrior and his chariot driver Krishna, is honorable. The other is greedy and oppressive, and has used trickery to obtain power. As the battle is drawn, Arjuna asks Krishna to take him out into the no-man's land between the two armies. From there he surveys both sides and concludes he wants no part in the conflict. He sees the humanity common to both sides, and admits that his belief system is no longer adequate to cope with the situation as he now understands it. Every aspect of his life is cast into doubt. He throws down his bow, overwhelmed with sorrow.

II Unitive Reasoning – Samkhya Yoga

Krishna at first urges Arjuna to pull himself together. Arjuna responds with a well-considered refusal, and instead asks Krishna to be his guru. Krishna smiles with satisfaction and begins immediately to teach him. He sketches out the world view of the day, which is not unlike our own. Then he begins to present Yoga as a crucial improvement, the secret key to a satisfying life. He denigrates religion as a trap for the foolish, and instead advocates well-balanced reason. His preliminary definition is that yoga is reason in action.

Yoga is unitive where ordinary thinking is dualistic. It unites what appears divided. Because of this, we should not harbor expectations about the future or regrets about the past. We have to learn detachment from impulsive behavior based on immediate perception, and turn inward. This is by no means easy, but it leads to spiritual clarity, otherwise known as union with the Absolute.

III Unitive Action – Karma Yoga

Arjuna, reacting to the teaching so far, says this is all well and good, but does this mean he has to do things that don't make sense to him? What kind of reasoning is that? Krishna begins to go into greater depth about action and its importance. The Gita is a treatise on active living. Krishna describes the old method of sacrificing to the gods, and says it is fine up to a point, but a true yogi is under no compunction about anything. It's just that the universe is reciprocal, and that has to be taken into account. We act to preserve world harmony, not to mention our own health and well-being. We are involved with life and yet our equanimity is not disturbed by its ups and downs.

Arjuna wonders why it is so hard to achieve such a simple goal. Krishna tells him that our desires sabotage our intentions, and they are very hard to conquer. Only when we have become stabilized in a profound awareness that transcends even our conscious reasoning will we be able to overcome our unhelpful inclinations.

IV Unitive Wisdom – Jnana Yoga

The wisdom in question is about knowing how to act, how to make intelligent decisions. Krishna tells Arjuna that the wisdom he is passing on to him has a lineage going back to the dawn of time, and now that he is a disciple he is included in that lineage. This is a perennial blessing that comes to anyone with a sincere desire to transcend their ordinary mentality. He adds that his way to enlightenment includes everyone, and is tailored to each individual. He assures Arjuna there is no special form of worship or morality to follow; he expects everyone to be free from all obligatory injunctions. But acting without a template is “elusively subtle indeed,” and even very intelligent people make mistakes.

Freely chosen activity is called sacrifice. There are all kinds of ways to freely relate to life, and they should be based on innate proclivities. Many sacrifices aim at self-realization. The best of all is the wisdom sacrifice, meaning to intelligently seek understanding. Understanding with wisdom strips away all extraneous considerations, leaving only their essence.

V Renouncing the Benefits of Action Through Yoga – Karma Samnyasa Yoga

Renunciation is introduced, and will be a theme for much of the work. It's a prominent question for truth seekers: what do I need to do in order to become realized? What should I dispense with? Renunciation is not different from yoga: both aim at equal-mindedness, at not being caught in conflicting pairs of opposites. Krishna insists that yoga and rationalism are also the same, that both are efforts to discard irrelevant complications. The popular forms of thinking and acting are full of unnecessary hard work and pain, and should be replaced. By not thinking of oneself as the actor, we become available for the Absolute to act through us, as our inner inspiration, and remain unsullied by what we do.

The Absolute is not interested in morality; living well is not a matter of being good or bad. We simply have to overcome our ignorance, and our innate intelligence will blaze forth like the sun. In this state all beings are seen as equal. Stabilize your mind by not overreacting to events, cultivate a philosophical attitude, and you will experience a continual joy that is not a product of passing fancies. Inner life becomes free and easy, as well as brilliant. By knowing the Absolute as the friend of all beings, one reaches peace.

VI Unitive Contemplation – Dhyana Yoga

Krishna reiterates that not being dependent on the results of action is proper renunciation, not giving up doing things, which is the

popular misconception. As long as you aim for particular ends, you can never be a yogi. Know that you are your own best friend. Support yourself, take care of yourself. Do not become your own enemy, as so many do. Then you will be steady and fair in all your dealings with the world.

Krishna then gives Arjuna simple instructions for meditation: to attune with the Absolute you must sit quiet and focused, without exaggeration, and the very stillness of it is unity with the Absolute. When the mind wanders, bring it back to the focal point. He gives a definitive definition of yoga: disaffiliation from the context of suffering. Duality is the context of suffering, and yogic unity is its cure. In it, you easily enjoy happiness that is ultimate. In this state, all beings and all events are seen to be equally divine.

Arjuna has his doubts, because the mind is very hard to control. Krishna agrees but gives him encouragement that success is possible. In yoga, nothing is ever lost. It is not a religious program that depends on the whim of a god or any specific form of behavior. A resolutely open mind does not close. Krishna assures him that a yogi is superior to all other types of religious or scientific seekers, and that is exactly what he should decide to be.

VII Synthesizing Wisdom and Knowledge – Jnana-Vijnana Yoga

Krishna tells Arjuna that only one in a million truly knows the truth of what he (Krishna) is describing. Most people mistake their own wishful thinking for Absolute reality. There has to be parity between wisdom and knowledge, or we will stay stuck in delusions. We perceive only the manifested world, but the transcendental is beyond perception. It is the essence of life, and what sustains the world. It is the common source of all beings. As such it is the essence of everything, and Krishna gives a few choice examples. Chapter X will present the Absolute's essential nature in greater detail. For now, Arjuna needs to know that this is a tricky

business, and we are easily fooled by appearances. A yogi has to dive beneath the surface where the pairs of opposites hold sway.

Four types of people seek truth: the distressed, the curious, seekers of perfection, and the wise. Seeking truth simply because it is of lasting value is the wisest choice. Still, due to the reciprocal nature of the universe, everyone finds what they seek in life, meaning all beliefs are valid up to a point. Realization is open to everyone from every possible point of view.

VIII Unitive Spiritual Progress – Akshara Brahma Yoga

Arjuna fires off a string of key questions that Krishna addresses one by one. The universe being an ocean of potentials, everything is possible. Our mental structure determines where we go in this life and the next, so it is best to focus on the transcendent reality at the core. All peripheral attractions lead to less than ideal conditions. Krishna suggests several unitive meditations to help focus the mind on the highest values. He also teaches that life is a grand sine wave of coming into existence and going out again, on a cosmic scale. Beyond existence and non-existence there is a perennial state that never perishes. The yogi aims for this transcendental Absolute, and not the two relative Absolutes, which attract religious seekers.

IX Unitive Contemplation as a Royal Science and Crowning Secret – Raja Vidya Raja Guhya Yoga

Krishna has determined that Arjuna has learned to thoroughly trust him, so he can now transmit the highest teachings of liberation to him. The subtle relationship between guru and disciple is the key to going farther. The exact relationship between the Absolute and the relative is a great mystery, so a yogi must be prepared to leave behind familiar terrain. Krishna reminds us that he is not the person (or God) that is visible, he is the Absolute itself. Anyone who forgets and treats him merely as Krishna is a colossal fool.

Those who take psychedelic drugs in order to know the mystery have a brief trip to heaven, but then come back down. True knowing goes beyond all concepts such as up and down. Still, whatever you worship is the Absolute in manifestation, and the benefits are on a par with each person's attitude. All are dear to the Absolute, whether naïve or wise, or in between. Spiritually speaking, everyone reaps what they sow. No one is barred from realization, including the most evil people. It's simply a matter of finding their right nature in tune with the Absolute. When all aspects of life are dedicated to truth, it will be found.

X The Unitive Recognition of Positive Values – Vibhuti Yoga

Because Arjuna has endeared himself to Krishna with his dedication, Krishna will describe himself as the Absolute in detail. He first affirms that he is the very source of everything, including the gods, implying that worshipping gods is not relevant to attaining the Absolute. All that's necessary is to understand according to fundamental principles. In other words, this is a science. Those who focus on the Absolute attain unitive understanding. Arjuna agrees, and asks for a full accounting of how the unitive pervades the relative. Krishna obliges, but concludes by saying, "So what? You don't need to know all these separate details. Turn to the unity."

XI The Unitive Vision of the Absolute – Visvarupa Darsana Yoga

Arjuna thanks Krishna for dispelling his confusion, but wonders if there is any way for him to have a firsthand experience of the unity. Krishna obliges by giving him a "divine eye" to see with, which may be a veiled reference to a psychedelic brew known as soma that was commonly used in spiritual disciplines in ancient India. Arjuna is astounded. The description of his experience is

justly famous as possibly the most extravagant theophany in all of sacred literature.

Arjuna learns that the Absolute is the motive force behind everything, and that his role is merely incidental. His mind is blown wide open, but Krishna insists that he pull himself together. Terrified by his experience, Arjuna begs to see Krishna as a god, but Krishna ignores the request and returns to his guise as a human being, Arjuna's servant. He assures Arjuna that religious practices do not promote the vision, only true devotion, without attachment and without enmity to all beings.

XII Unitive Devotion – Bhakti Yoga

Krishna reiterates that becoming one with the Absolute is the whole point of a spiritual quest. The question is, should we relate to it personally or impersonally, in other words, as something conceivable or inconceivable? Is the Absolute God or simply a natural phenomenon? Is there any difference? According to Krishna, the personalized route is easier, since our minds operate that way. Meditating on nothingness is very difficult. But you are free to choose whichever way suits you best.

Several respectable routes to attain the Absolute are presented in descending order of importance. First, being fully devoted to the Absolute as a kind of all-encompassing saving grace. Next, relating all thoughts to the focal point of the Absolute. Or you could adopt a spiritual technique and practice it diligently. If even that is too much, dedicate everything you do to the Absolute. Finally, at least renounce the benefits of your actions, and dedicate what you do to the good of all. Everyone should adopt a carefree attitude of loving kindness, dedicated to justice, equal-minded, gentle and restrained in action, inwardly related to the Absolute. That is the essence of unitive devotion.

XIII Uniting the Actual and the Perceptual – Kshetra-Kshetrajna Vibhaga Yoga

Krishna considers the relationship of consciousness and matter, spirit and nature, or wisdom and ignorance, to be the most important principle to know. The Absolute is the spirit within consciousness, and nature is the active principle within matter. This chapter contains a comprehensive list of spiritual qualities. Those who are confused about the Gita's message would do well to read it first.

Arjuna experienced oneness back in Chapter XI. As he comes back down to earth, he is introduced to duality in the next two chapters, and a threefold scheme in the next two. After that the Gita becomes very much oriented to practical considerations. Here we are reminded to try to see the Absolute within all beings, and the laws of nature within all structures. Being clear about which is which is the highest wisdom.

XIV Transcending the Three Gunas – Gunatraya Vibhaga Yoga

The Absolute is the source of Nature, which has three binding aspects, called sattva, rajas and tamas. Their exposition is a unique contribution of the Gita. Sattva binds by pleasure and knowledge conditioning; rajas binds by involvement in action; and tamas binds by laziness and ignorance. They operate in rotation: we are first attracted by the joy, then we put energy into maintaining the joy, and eventually it becomes merely a memory, devoid of interest. Then we look for another stimulus to start the cycle over again. A yogi is advised to find abiding joy within, and not futilely seek it in the surroundings. The wise regard all aspects of manifestation as being of secondary importance to their source, the Absolute.

XV The Unitive Notion of God – Purushottama Yoga

This is the most mystical of all the chapters. Religion is compared to a holy fig tree with deeply set roots, whose leaves are the sacred verses; Krishna instructs Arjuna to ruthlessly sever all ties to it, and only then can he freely seek the Creative Principle. It is a light unlike any light that can be seen with the eyes. This light continually takes on bodies at birth and sheds them at death, all the time partaking of the essence of existence, like a wind gathering scents. It is present in the heart of every being.

Not unlike the Christian Holy Trinity, there are three Absolutes: a manifested and unmanifested Absolute, and a transcendental Absolute. Krishna specifically refers to this as the most secret doctrine, leading to wisdom.

XVI Discriminating Higher and Lower Values – Daivasura Sampad Vibhaga Yoga

Values are critically important to spiritual life, because the higher ones lead to liberation while the lower ones lead to bondage. Krishna offers a comprehensive list of positive and negative values. Since the entire Gita up till now has focused on the higher values, Krishna spends some time inveighing against the ways we are deluded. As human failings have remained remarkably similar over time, the chapter sounds like it could have been written yesterday. It offers a valuable opportunity to search our souls for the shortcomings we routinely perceive in others while pointedly ignoring in ourselves.

XVII Unitive Faith – Sraddhatraya Vibhaga Yoga

Spiritual faith is analyzed into three categories, based on the gunas. Faith is important because we are formed of our faith: what we believe makes us who we are. Our whole mental structure is based on how we think. This is true of staunch materialists as much as the so-called faithful. The chapter is highly symbolic and can be applied widely to anyone's life, but traditionally has been taken

literally in a severely limited sense. The categories of food, sacrifice, discipline, and gifting are graded according to sattva, rajas and tamas. Krishna lauds the phrase *aum tat sat* as designating the essence of true faith, and explains it to Arjuna.

XVIII Unitive Renunciation and Relinquishment – Samnyasa Yoga

It's time to wrap up loose ends and bring Arjuna back to everyday reality. Proper renunciation does not mean inaction but giving up expectations of the benefits of action. Action occurs due to many causes, the least of which is conscious decision making. We need to be open to the whole panoply of available input.

Knowledge, action, and the one who acts, are assessed according to the gunas, as are reason, willpower and happiness. Caste is analyzed in more detail than earlier, and the exhortation is repeated to act according to one's own dharma: better is one's own dharma done poorly than someone else's done well. The implication is that most people perform dharma that is not authentic to them. If we follow our own light we will improve. By acting in accord with the Absolute, the inner light, one comes to the highest state. On the other hand, action generated by the ego is mediocre or worse.

Krishna sums up his teaching in the same words as he used at the end of Chapter IX, at the highest point of the Gita arch. The physical, mental, spiritual and transcendental aspects of life should be conjoined with the Absolute. Then, critically scrutinizing all aspects of every situation, act according to your own lights. This is true freedom.

Arjuna expresses his profound appreciation for Krishna's ineffable instruction. He picks up the bow of intentionality he threw down in the first chapter, now fully prepared to make his own wise decisions and carry out his life with expertise.