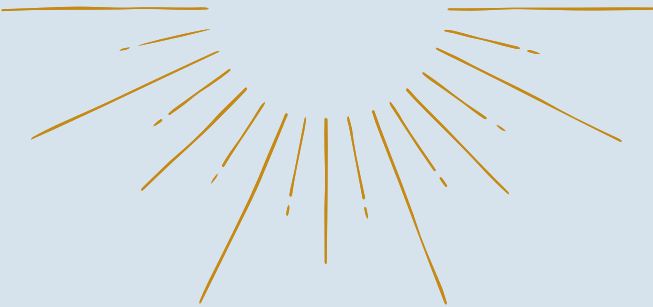


an excerpt from

JOURNEY INTO THE
BHAGAVAD-GĪTĀ



by

Hari-kirtana das

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The Yoga Ladder

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

~ Arthur C. Clarke

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As with any science, the science of self-realization that Kṛṣṇa is teaching in the Bhagavad-gītā has a technology that’s designed to test its hypotheses. That technology is called *yoga*. In the Bhagavad-gītā, the word ‘*yoga*’ has a double-meaning: the extrication of consciousness from the influence of illusion and the union of infinitesimal individual consciousness with infinite Universal Consciousness.

There are four paths of *yoga* in the Bhagavad-gītā:

1. *karma-yoga*; the yoga of action
2. *jñāna-yoga*; the yoga of knowledge
3. *dhyana-yoga*; the yoga of meditation
4. *bhakti-yoga*; the yoga of devotion

The traditional understanding is that there are three paths of *yoga* in the Bhagavad-gītā: *karma-yoga*, *bhakti-yoga*, and *jñāna-yoga*. This understanding corresponds to the three major divisions of the text, with the central position of *bhakti* being comparable to a crown jewel flanked by accent stones. The idea of a fourth distinct path of *yoga* being integrated into the first major division of the Gītā and acting as a segue into the second major division is a relatively

recent exegetic development. This fourth path, *dhyana-yoga*, is also commonly referred to as *raja-yoga* or *aṣṭāṅga-yoga*, the latter designation not to be confused with the modern style of postural yoga that goes by the same name.

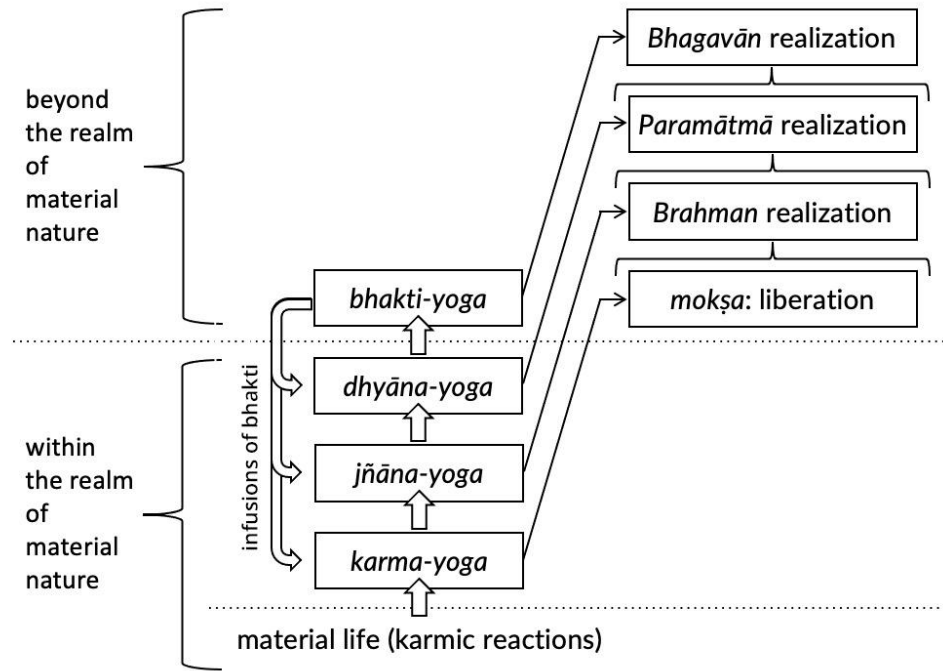
The sequence in which Kṛṣṇa speaks about each path of yoga is as follows:

- In the first major division of the Gītā (chapters 1-6), Kṛṣṇa will introduce the principles of *karma-yoga* after he establishes the basic principles of discernment (*sāṅkhya*) by which one can distinguish spirit from matter.
- Next, Kṛṣṇa will expand the scope of *karma-yoga* by introducing elements of *jñāna-yoga* to illustrate how action should be informed by knowledge.
- Then, from the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter through the 8<sup>th</sup>, Kṛṣṇa will transition from the outward-facing path of action (*karma-yoga*) to the inward-turning path of mysticism and meditation (*dhyana-yoga*). This transition straddles the first two major divisions.
- The second major division (chapters 7-12) focuses on *bhakti-yoga*, the *yoga* of devotion.
- The third major division (chapters 13-18), with its focus on *jñāna-yoga*, begins with the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter and proceeds into the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter, where Kṛṣṇa will conclude with a summary of the entire Gītā.

Each of the paths of yoga in the Bhagavad-gītā can be thought of as the purification of a different aspect of our lives: *karma-yoga* is the purification of our daily activities, *jñāna-yoga* is the purification of our intellect, *dhyana-yoga* is the purification of the mind, and *bhakti-yoga* is the purification of the heart. All four paths of yoga share the same metaphysical assumptions that we've already discussed. They also share a common element of practice: self-discipline. And those who have mastered each path share similar symptoms, such as freedom from material desires, fearlessness, and contentment.

The four paths of yoga can be visualized as a ladder. Each rung of the ladder delivers the practitioner to a different level of realization that corresponds to progressively higher states of being. Each progressively higher state of being includes the levels of realization beneath it. As is

the case with elevation in general, the higher we go, the more we can see. In this case, what we can see is an expanding view of reality from progressively higher spiritual perspectives.



A popular assumption in contemporary spirituality is that there are many paths to one Truth. In the Gītā, we’ll find that the one Truth is described as having different features. The idea of one Truth with multiple features is a paradox that invites the question, ‘are some features higher than other features?’ In the Gītā, we’ll see that the answer is a qualified ‘yes.’ Throughout the Gītā, Kṛṣṇa will talk about liberation from material existence and refer to the one Absolute Truth in terms of three paradoxical features:

1. *Brahman*: the impersonal and undifferentiated spiritual substance of reality *in toto*.
2. *Paramātmā*: the all-pervading and ever-present expansion of Universal Consciousness.
3. *Bhagavān*: the personal and all-inclusive form of the complete Absolute Truth.

The paradoxical part is that, in a sense, there’s no difference between the three features of the Absolute Truth because the Absolute Truth is singular by definition. And yet, these features are not all exactly the same. In other words, both non-duality and variety are present in

transcendence. This is one of the great mysteries of the Bhagavad-gītā: the complete Absolute Truth has a variety of features, but this variety doesn't compromise the singularity of the Absolute Truth. So, insofar as the four paths of yoga in the Bhagavad-gītā are concerned, all roads lead to Rome, but the train to Chicago doesn't go to St. Louis.

Let's take a closer look at each of the four paths of *yoga* that Kṛṣṇa describes in the Bhagavad-gītā.

### ***karma-yoga***

The first path of *yoga* is *karma-yoga*. *Karma-yoga* is action that's performed without attachment to the results of the action. In order to understand *karma-yoga*, it's helpful to know that Kṛṣṇa describes three different kinds of action in the Bhagavad-gītā: moral action, immoral action, and transcendental action.

Technically, the Sanskrit word *karma* simply means 'action,' or, more specifically, action undertaken according to scriptural directives for the sake of fulfilling a material desire. Our desires may be selfish or altruistic, but either way, if we act with the intention of fulfilling a material desire we generate a corresponding material reaction that perpetuates our entanglement in material existence.

To parse it out a little further, the word *karma* specifically indicates moral action. A moral action is an action that's in harmony with cosmic order. Such actions generate correspondingly harmonious reactions. In other words, *karma* in Sanskrit is synonymous with 'good *karma*.' The word *vikarma* indicates immoral action or action that's out of harmony with cosmic order. Such actions generate correspondingly dissonant reactions, otherwise known as 'bad *karma*.'

In the Bhagavad-gītā, 'bad *karma*' is bad and 'good *karma*' is . . . also bad. The whole idea of a transactional relationship with cosmic order wherein we make deposits and withdrawals and try to maximize our dividends without getting hit with penalties is derided in the Gītā as an ideology for the unintelligent. The Gītā isn't a handbook for gaming the karmic system to our advantage nor does it promote the ethical pursuit of karmic profits; it promotes putting an end to *karma* altogether.

To that end, the word *akarma* indicates action that transcends cosmic order altogether and therefore doesn't produce any reaction at all. Transcendental action, action that elevates the actor beyond the realm of reactions, is the ultimate substance and fulfillment of *karma-yoga*. Practicing *karma-yoga* allows us to act without adding any new reactions to our existing backlog of reactions-in-waiting, which gives us an opportunity to empty out the stockpile of reactions we've accrued over the course of a gazillion previous lives. The ultimate result of emptying out our karmic backlog is freedom from the obligation to experience any further karmic reactions, otherwise known as *moksa* or liberation.

Although *akarma* can technically be translated as 'inaction,' inactivity in the sense of not doing anything isn't liberating. Choosing not to act is not the same as acting in a way that doesn't generate a reaction. When Arjuna, in his confusion, declares that he won't fight, he's choosing not to act. Kṛṣṇa's position will be that choosing between action or inaction is a false dichotomy because Arjuna has a third choice available to him: changing the quality of his actions from material to spiritual. *Karma-yoga* is the art of transforming a mundane activity into a spiritual activity by progressively changing one's motivation for action.

Kṛṣṇa will also tell Arjuna that abstaining from action isn't just inadvisable; it's impossible. Choosing not to act is an action of its own. The consequences of our inaction will still come back to us as a karmic reaction. Therefore, Kṛṣṇa will advise Arjuna to engage in liberating action, *karma-yoga*, rather than pursue inaction.

For Arjuna, the liberating action will be fighting. This is one of the most enigmatic aspects of the Bhagavad-gītā: how can Arjuna become a spiritually enlightened person and then choose to fight? We tend to think of fighting as inherently un-spiritual, so Arjuna's readiness to fight after hearing Kṛṣṇa's instructions seems profoundly counter-intuitive.

In fact, Kṛṣṇa's persistence in encouraging Arjuna to fight is often a showstopper for people who don't believe that a spiritual teacher, to say nothing of God, should ever encourage violence under any circumstances. It's easy to understand why someone might think that Arjuna's aversion to fighting is more spiritual than Kṛṣṇa's advocacy for fighting.

But the key to practicing *karma-yoga* isn't found in what we do; it's found in why we do it and who we do it for. *Karma-yoga* is all about letting go of our attachment to the outcomes of our actions and changing our motivation for action. What we do may change or it may not.

Either way, the substance of an action is subordinate to the principle of detachment from the results of our actions and the transformation of our motivation from selfish to selfless.

When action without attachment is informed by transcendental knowledge, the *yogī* makes further progress up the *yoga* ladder. As we move deeper into the science of *karma-yoga*, Kṛṣṇa will introduce *jñāna-yoga*, the yoga of knowledge, as an enlightened context for the performance of *karma-yoga*.

### ***jñāna-yoga***

*Jñāna-yoga*, the *yoga* of knowledge, is the science of seeing the unseen spiritual context within which the material world exists. This path of *yoga* recognizes two kinds of knowledge: book knowledge and realized knowledge. Book knowledge, the comprehension of theoretical information, is referred to simply as *jñāna* and realized knowledge, or experiential wisdom, is referred to as *vijñāna*, the latter being acquired by acting on the basis of the former. In other words, realized knowledge arises from the practical application of book knowledge.

As we saw with the word *dharma*, Sanskrit words can have multiple meanings. As a result, Sanskrit verses often contain multiple layers of meaning and different verses that use the same words can be understood in different ways. For example, *jñāna* and *vijñāna* can also be understood to mean material knowledge and spiritual knowledge respectively.

The practice of *jñāna-yoga* consists primarily of renunciation, austerity, meditation, and the study of *Vedānta*, which refers to the philosophical conclusions of the Upaniṣads. The usual objective of *jñāna-yoga* is the realization of *Brahman*, the first of the three features of the Absolute Truth. *Brahman*, can be thought of in two ways, which is a little ironic since *Brahman* is nondual by definition. Those two ways are:

1. As the undifferentiated spiritual foundation of all existence.
2. As the spiritual quality of existence that's shared by all sentient beings.

This brings us to an ongoing philosophical disagreement between two different schools of *Vedānta*. *Jñāna-yogīs* are typically associated with a school of thought called *Advaita-vedānta*, the philosophy of absolute non-dualism. The philosophy of *Advaita-vedānta* is based on the 8<sup>th</sup> century teacher Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Vedānta-sūtra*. The *Vedānta-sūtra* is a codified

distillation of the philosophical conclusions of the Upaniṣads (whereas the Bhagavad-gītā is a lyrical summary of Upaniṣadic philosophy). The word *vedānta*, which means ‘the conclusion of knowledge’ is often used as shorthand for the philosophy of *Advaita-vedānta*.

In addition to Śaṅkara’s school of *Advaita-vedānta*, there are four other major schools of *Vedānta*, each of which posits Viṣṇu (or Kṛṣṇa) as the Supreme Being. These four schools of thought accommodate duality as a feature of reality to one degree or another. Collectively, these four schools represent the philosophy of Vaishnavism or *Vaiṣṇava-vedānta*.

The crux of the disagreement is one of impersonalism versus personalism. *Advaita-vedānta* proposes that *Brahman*, the impersonal and undifferentiated Oneness of Being that’s beyond name, form, qualities, activities, relationships, or any other personal feature, is the singular and complete Absolute Truth and that the appearance of a multiplicity of beings having individual experiences is an illusory superimposition on *Brahman*. By contrast, *Vaiṣṇava-vedānta* proposes that the complete Absolute Truth wouldn’t be complete without an infinite array of transcendental personal attributes, such as unlimited names, forms, qualities, activities, relationships, and inconceivable energies that can be transformed in such a way as to produce differentiated varieties of beings and experiences that exist as valid features of a reality that includes both substantive and illusory components.

I bring this disagreement up because both schools of thought have a long history of producing commentaries on the Bhagavad-gītā. These commentaries differ significantly in their philosophical interpretations. In most cases, the pervasiveness of non-dualistic impersonalism in both popular conceptions of Vedic philosophy and post-religious spirituality is such that one can’t be faulted for presupposing that the Gītā’s philosophical conclusion must be one of absolute non-duality.

This edition of the Gītā contains no such presupposition. Here’s why: in the Bhagavad-gītā we’ll find that Kṛṣṇa clearly speaks of himself and his variegated energies, both spiritual and material, as constituting the sum total of reality. In so doing, he’ll establish his own inconceivable simultaneous oneness with and difference from everything. And when Kṛṣṇa speaks about *Brahman*, he’ll speak in terms of both the qualitative nature of all beings and the quantitative singularity of Being. Hence, the *jñāna-yoga* of the Bhagavad-gītā accounts for both a multiplicity of beings and a unity of Being. Therefore, this presentation of the Gītā’s



philosophy falls squarely in the camp of the *Vaiṣṇava-vedānta* school of thought that proposes a synthesis of duality and non-duality and prioritizes the transcendental personalism of the Absolute Truth.

Just as *jñāna-yoga* informs *karma-yoga* by providing an enlightened context for the performance of one's daily activities, *jñāna-yoga* also informs the next path of *yoga*, *dhyāna-yoga*, by providing an enlightened context for the performance of meditation.

### ***dhyāna-yoga***

Also known as *rāja-yoga* ('king yoga') and *aṣṭāṅga-yoga* ('the yoga of eightfold mysticism'), *dhyāna-yoga* is the purification of the mind by means of meditation. This form of *yoga*, which is also systematically presented in Patañjali's *Yoga-sūtras*, is extremely difficult to perform; it requires the practitioner to disengage from the world, maintain strict control of the senses, observe celibacy, direct one's awareness inward, control the movements of the life force within one's body through disciplined control of the breath, and meditate continuously on the Supreme Self.

The Supreme Self, known in Sanskrit as the *Paramātmā*, is the second of the three features of the Absolute Truth. Present everywhere all the time and fully cognizant of everything in all respects, the *Paramātmā* is the one Soul of all souls. Whereas we are only aware of our own experiences, the 'paramount' *atmā* or 'Super-Soul' is fully aware of everyone's experiences.

The objective of *dhyāna-yoga* is the realization of *Paramātmā*, the localized aspect of Universal Consciousness who resides within the heart. Whereas *Brahman* is an impersonal feature of the Absolute Truth that corresponds to the attribute of eternality, *Paramātmā* is a personal feature of the Absolute Truth that, in addition to eternality, corresponds to the attributes of omnipresence and omniscience. Cognition and agency are characteristics of person-ness and the *Paramātmā* has both. Hence, the *Paramātmā* is a personal aspect of the Absolute Truth.

Throughout the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa will often refer to 'the Lord' or speak of the *Paramātmā* as if the *Paramātmā* were someone other than himself. Elsewhere, he directly confirms that he is the *Paramātmā*. Therefore, we can understand that Kṛṣṇa, who is externally appearing before Arjuna in his own personal form and simultaneously residing within Arjuna's heart in his expanded form

as the *Paramātmā*, the innermost friend of all living beings, will usually speak about himself in the third person when referencing his *Paramātmā* feature.

This brings us to the third feature of the Absolute Truth, *Bhagavān*, the personal form of the Absolute Truth, which is only revealed to those who have perfected the fourth path of yoga, *bhakti-yoga*.

### ***bhakti-yoga***

*Bhakti-yoga* is the purification of the heart through active expressions of love for *Bhagavān*: the one person who, being categorically different from all other people, is the original cause of all subsequent causes and effects. In other words, *Bhagavān* is the one person who's uniquely qualified to occupy the position of God. Contrary to popular misconceptions, *bhakti* is not just the sentiment of devotion nor is it just the principle of devotion without any particular object of devotion. The term *bhakti* specifically indicates devotional service performed as an active expression of love for the Supreme Person or for the purpose of developing such love.

The practice of *bhakti-yoga* is the scientific method by which one gradually develops a heightened sense of God's omnipresence, a deeper appreciation of God's beauty, and a deeper awareness of God's love. The goal of *bhakti-yoga* is to realize the full potential of our personal relationship with the Supreme Person. The perfection of *bhakti-yoga* is spontaneous love for God; the offering of love for the sake of love. *Bhakti-yoga* is both the means to an end and an end in and of itself; the cultivation of love in practice evolves into the experience of love in perfection, but the methods by which love is expressed remain the same.

Kṛṣṇa repeatedly recommends the practice of *bhakti-yoga* throughout the Gītā, so much so that we see the interjection of *bhakti* into each of the other paths of yoga. *Karma-yoga*, *jñāna-yoga*, and *dhyāna-yoga* don't just culminate in *bhakti-yoga*; they each require an element of *bhakti-yoga* in order to reach their own fulfillment.

In addition to being the straw that stirs the drink of all the other paths, Kṛṣṇa describes *bhakti-yoga* as being categorically different from the other paths in three significant ways:

1. Its practice immediately lifts the practitioner to the level of liberation
2. The practice of *bhakti-yoga* by itself brings about all of the results that can be achieved by the other three paths

3. The highest level of spiritual realization can only be attained by the practice of *bhakti-yoga*.

The highest level of realization, according to Kṛṣṇa, is realization of his own personal form, otherwise known as *Bhagavān* realization. Kṛṣṇa will make it abundantly clear that, as far as he's concerned, there's no truth higher than himself. Kṛṣṇa's position as the highest truth is one of the Gītā's secrets hiding in plain sight, like a string hiding within a pearl necklace.

Kṛṣṇa's position as *Bhagavān* is established by the phrase that precedes his vocalizations in the Gītā: '*śrī-bhagavān uvāca*,' which may be translated as "the Blessed One said" or "the Beloved Lord said."

But who is the Lord beloved by? Who can give God a blessing?

We should take note that the phrase that precedes Kṛṣṇa's voice in the Gītā is not just '*bhagavān uvāca*,' it's '*śrī-bhagavān uvāca*.' The word '*śrī*' is very significant: beyond being an honorific that indicates beauty or opulence, '*Śrī*' is the name of the Goddess of Fortune, the feminine aspect of Ultimate Divinity and the source of Kṛṣṇa's magnificence.

*Śrī* is the *śakti* of *bhakti*, the personification of the power of devotion. This is another of the Gītā's secrets hiding in plain sight: the feminine aspect of divinity is also present on the battlefield, hidden within the form of Kṛṣṇa, yet shining forth as Kṛṣṇa's splendor in the same way that the core of the Sun is the hidden source of sunshine.

Therefore, a *bhakti-yogī* develops a devotional relationship with Kṛṣṇa, the male aspect of divinity, by seeking the grace of the bestower of devotion: the female aspect of divinity. Again, the Absolute Truth is singular by definition and yet the Absolute Truth has differentiated attributes because both duality and non-duality must be present in the Absolute Truth in order for the Absolute Truth to be complete.

In this case, the one Absolute Truth is understood to consist of two aspects that are both beyond gender and the epitome of gender. Because the Absolute Truth is complete, all gender identities, along with the male and female archetypes, originate in the Absolute Truth. Therefore, the Absolute Truth is all-inclusive: anyone can practice *bhakti-yoga* and enter into a relationship of love with the personal feature of the complete Absolute Truth.

In bridging the gap between material and spiritual levels of experience, the yoga ladder takes the practitioner to progressively higher levels of spiritual realization. The culmination of an ascent up the ladder subsumes the paths of yoga that lead to it and their respective perfections. The highest rung on the ladder, *Bhakti-yoga*, doesn't invalidate our experience of individuality by declaring that we're all One; contrary to popular assumptions that merging into a state of undifferentiated unity is the ultimate goal of *yoga*, the *yoga* of the Bhagavad-gītā confirms the reality of our individuality and proposes a natural relationship between all individual souls and the one transcendental soul who is both the original source and complete substance of Absolute Reality.

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