Hinduism III:
Society and the Individual
Core Concepts in the Bhagavad Gita:

- Presents Krishna as the finite form of the infinite divine Brahman
- Asks two key questions:
  1) What is the relation between the ordinary empirical self (Guna-Self/Prakriti) and the ultimate self (Atman/Purusha)?
  2) By what means can one come to realize or experience that ultimate self?
Reality and the Self

- The world of appearances is impermanent and composed of ever changing processes
- The true nature of reality is permanent and enduring and never-changing
- The ultimate self (atman) is identified with ultimate reality (Brahman)
- => The ultimate self (atman) is permanent and unchanging
The Lower Self

- Our prakriti or guna-self is a composite of three tendencies in various proportions - which accounts for our various personalities and types of persons.

- The tendencies or gunas:
  - Sattva: intellectual activity
  - Rajas: vigorous action
  - Tamas: devotional activity

- As each of these gunas are really bonds which prevent us from realizing the Atman - we must focus on disciplining that which binds us most - ie. we choose the yoga which most closely corresponds to the predominant guna of our personality.
The Gunas and Yoga

**Guna**
- 1. **Sattva**
- 2. **Rajas**
- 3. **Tamas**

**Yoga:**
- 1. **Jnana Yoga** – the way to Brahman through intellectual exercises. The goal here is to “cleave the domain of ignorance with the sword of discrimination.” One works through hearing (listening to sages and readings of the scripture) and thinking (prolonged intensive reflection). Said to be the shortest and steepest path to God.
- 2. **Karma Yoga** – the path to Brahman through work. One negates the self through work – each task is approached as if it were the only one – and when completed, one leaves it to go on to the next. No room is allowed for native egoism therefore one is brought to the Godhead through work and the struggle to transcend finite existence.
- 3. **Bhakti Yoga** – the path to Brahman through love. Based on the precept that men become more like the things they love, one learns to love God for the sake of God and the love itself and not for any other ulterior purpose. Involves *Japam* (repeating the names of God) ringing the changes on love (reflecting on the many variations on love) and the worship of one’s chosen ideal (worship of God in one of its many forms – usually one of God’s human incarnations – often Krishna). This form of yoga is at the heart of the Hari Krishna movement.

From Huston Smith, Religions of the World
The Four Aims of Life

Human Aims - *Purushartha*

- **Kama** - pleasure
- **Artha** - career or means of life
- **Dharma** - virtuous living
- **Moksha** - enlightenment or self-liberation

The Four Aims of Life

- In the traditional view - these are hierarchical - that is in order to satisfy the last step or Moksha - one must conquer the first three fully.

- They are also in a sense cooperative and non-hierarchical:
  - Kama, Artha and even Moksha are regulated by Dharma
  - The pursuit of Kama, Artha and Dharma set up the conditions by which Moksha can be achieved.
  - Every life needs some aspect of all four aims in order to be considered a life well lived.
  - One needs some Artha in order to pursue any of the other three aims – certainly more Artha can be seen to obviously contribute to more Kama and more Dharma (charitable contributions, etc.)

The purpose of the Varnas is to provide structure and support for a well-organized, hierarchal society whereby all the basic functions are performed and adequate opportunities for members to achieve basic aims of the purusharthas are present.

Each Varna is broken down into many sub-categories called jatis or castes.
The Varnas:

- **Bramana Varna**: the priests and teachers (Brahma’s head & mouth) "characterized by intelligence and speech...they are responsible for preserving knowledge and culture, performing rituals and safeguarding morality." (p.95)

- **Kshatriya Varna**: protectors and administrators (Brahma’s arms) "...characterized by strength, valor and courage."

- **Vaishya Varna**: traders and producers (Brahma’s thighs) "...characterized by practical intelligence and initiative...."

- **Shudra Varna**: workers and servants (Brahma’s feet) "...characterized by lower intelligence, lack of initiative and ability to take on huge burdens...."
Ashramas: Life Stages

- **Brahmacarya Ashrama** – student – during this stage one prepares for the next, learning one's duties, proper goals, skills, self-discipline, etc.

- **Grihastha Ashrama** – householder – those who uphold society and at this stage it is also critical to uphold dharma

- **Vanaprastha Ashrama** – retiree – this stage is marked by an abandonment of worldly success and material goods

- **Sannyasa Ashrama** – renunciate/recluse – meditative final preparation for self-realization

- Each of these stages are progressed through in a single lifetime – providing one lives long enough and is sufficiently evolved. It is thought essential to human society to do what one must do at the proper time in life.