In 12.8-11, Krishna offers instruction for practicing the yoga of devotion. One should fix one’s mind upon Krishna, let one’s understanding enter him, and one can then dwell in him without doubt. However, if one cannot concentrate one’s thought firmly on Krishna, one can strive to reach Krishna through the diligent and repeated practice of yoga (abhyasa-yoga). And if one is incapable of this kind of repeated practice, one can dedicate oneself to action, performing actions for Krishna alone. And if one is unable to do even that, then one can resort to him in yoga, following the path of karma-yoga that Krishna has both taught and modeled, the path of non-attached action: renounce the results of one’s actions, restrain oneself and act (12.8-11).

However, there ensues 12.12, which has been a stumbling block for commentators, ancient and modern, for it appears to reverse the hierarchy just established. In 12.8-11, we see that the highest path is focused concentration on Krishna. If one is unable to attain focused concentration, one should engage in repeated practice, striving to focus one’s thoughts upon Krishna. If we are unable to engage in this sort of yogic practice, we can follow the path of action integrated with devotion, performing all our actions for Krishna’s sake. If we are unable to attain such pure-hearted devotion of our actions (a positive practice) we should practice the form of Karma yoga that Krishna does: simply renouncing the results of actions (an abstention or negation of attachment).

In 12.12, however, we hear that knowledge or wisdom (jñā) is better than practice (abhyasa), and meditation (dhyāna) is better than knowledge. Abandoning the fruit of action is better than meditation; peace follows immediately from this abandonment. Here then we have abandoning the results of actions as highest on the hierarchy; then comes meditation and then knowledge. One plausible attempt to resolve this incongruity is to suggest that if we are unable to attain devotion to Krishna, the best we can do without devotion is to abandon the results of action. Thus verse 12.12 picks up where 12.11 ends.

Malinar offers a contrasting resolution of the problem, emphasizing the importance of abandonment or
relinquishment of desire (tyaga). Relinquishment of desire is not only a precondition for all practice, as suggested in 12.11, but is also an ongoing requirement, since desire and attachment can come up repeatedly in all stages of practice; once can even sit in meditation and recall the attractions of the senses (3.6). iv

Thus, even if one is not capable of complete immersion in Krishna, we can attain serenity simply from abandonment of the fruits of action. We can thus abandon hatred, offering friendship and compassion to all living things. We can give up thoughts of I and mine; accept both pleasure and sorrow alike, and endure all things with patience. This yogin who is always content and self restrained is a devotee of Krishna and dear to him. Most dear to Krishna are those devotees who cherish this divine nectar of sacred duty, intent on Krishna in their faith (12.12-20). The highest yoga is the yoga of devotion, which maintains devotion to dharmic duty, devoting all action to the Lord.

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i Śankara defines abhyasa as “withdrawing thought from all quarters and fixing it again and again on some particular object. It is this repetition that differentiates abhyasa from the steady (sthira, acala) Samadhi.” We will see this theme return in Buddhist catalogs of mindfulness meditation. See below, Chapter 11.

ii Cf. Theodor, 101. Theodor points to these verses as reinforcing a ladder-like structure underlying the Gita.

iii Douglas Hill expands on this approach:

“Even the last of the first list is better than any method that excludes devotion. ‘Abandonment of the fruit of work’ in a spirit of devotion is better than mere ‘meditation’ that would reject all loving service; and ‘meditation’ better than ‘knowledge of the intellect, that would dispense with work and yet not know the warmth of love; while ‘constant practice’ that lacks the steadiness of knowledge, and shares its cold indifference to devotion, is lowest of all methods.” Theodor likewise explains the hierarchy continuing in 12.12. He explains of 12.11: “As opposed to the higher stage, which furthers the offering of action’s fruits to the supreme, this stage furthers a general relinquishment and as such is considered lower.” And he continues, referring to 12.12: “A lower stage still is meditation, knowledge is next, and eventually there is practice. It does not appear to be the yoga practice mentioned at the second step of the ladder, and it may well be practice of the Veda.” The latter is the interpretation of Van Buitenen, who sees the ladder thus: 1. Practice of the Veda 2. Knowledge. 3. Contemplation (on the contents of this knowledge). 4. Karmayoga, which leads to serenity and release. He comments that this is perhaps the most unequivocal statement of the superiority of karmayoga to jñānayoga.

Zaehner comments that 12.12 does not seem to flow naturally from what has gone before, but tries to resolve the problem with a different approach, which is worth quoting: “Assuming it does fit in, however, then we must take ‘wisdom’ to mean ‘concentrating one’s thoughts on God’; ‘meditation’ to mean meditation on God in spiritual exercise’ (so verse 6); and ‘the abandonment of the fruit of works’ to
mean not what has been mentioned in the last stanza but the ‘casting off of all works on God’ again referred to in verse 6. Then the ‘renouncing of the fruit of all your works’ of verse 11 would mean the renouncing of them without reference to God. This would seem to make sense since, as this chapter tirelessly points out, the classic virtues of detachment and indifference are only perfected if they are complemented by the love of God.”

Śankara explains the order in 12.12 by suggesting that Krishna here exalts surrender of the fruit of actions because it is the best means for the unenlightened such as Arjuna. Radhakrishnan suggests that “renunciation of results” is recommended because it is easier than the other approaches.

Minor sides with Hill. He points out that the practices of 12.8-11 all relate to devotion to Krishna, which 12.1-7 also emphasizes. However, in 12.12 Krishna is not mentioned. Minor, however, adds one caveat to the interpretation of Hill. Hill relates “abandonment of the results of action” to devotion; in the verse itself, there is no indication that the abandonment of the fruit of action is more related to devotion than any of the other practices. Minor then suggests that if 12.8-11 are elements of devotion, while 12.12 suggests these same elements without devotion, 12.12 might be saying that if any path is practiced without devotion, it is abandonment of the results of action which brings immediate peace. The best way to achieve the peace of liberation about one’s actions is to let to off attachment to them. This allows one to continue one’s social duties, while still attaining liberation. Another approach, Minor adds, might be that Hill is correct in placing abandonment of the fruits of actions on a different level than the others, because it is a summary of Gītā yoga, for jñānajñāna is the mental attitude of non-attachment which one is to have in practice, and devotion is the realization that in doing one’s actions it is Krishna’s lower nature that does them and not one’s true self. Therefore, one should perform them for Krishna and not for personal benefit. In any case, the chapter “clearly proclaims the centrality of devotion to Krishna as no secondary, optional element, but as the key to liberation, and the Gītā declares that jñānajñāna, karma, and bhakti are not alternative paths to the goal but three elements of the one and only path.”

Georg Feuerstein resolves the problem in a different way. He translates 12.12 as follows: For better than [ritual] practice is knowledge. Superior to knowledge is meditation. From meditation [comes] the relinquishment of actions’ fruit. From relinquishment [results] immediate peace.

He takes the expression dhyanat karma-phala-tyagah: as an ablative indicating direction rather than comparison: from meditation comes the relinquishment of actions’ fruit. He translates the entire passage as follows:

12. 9 Now [if] you are unable to concentrate the mind firmly on Me, then seek to attain Me through Yoga practice (abhyasayogena) . .

12.10 And [if] you are unable to apply yourself to yogic] practice, [then] be (bhava) My supreme work. For even performing actions for My sake, you shall attain perfection.

12.11 Now [if] you are unable to do even this, then, resorting to My Yoga [through devotion] and relinquishing all actions’ fruit, perform [actions with] controlled self.
12.12. For better than ritual practice is knowledge. Superior to knowledge is meditation. From meditation comes the relinquishment of actions’ fruit. From relinquishment results immediate peace.


iv This is the proposal of Angelica Malinar, *The Bhagavad Gītā: Doctrines and Contexts*, 190-91. Like Feuerstein, she notes that relinquishment (*tyaga*) of the fruits of action results in immediate peace.