

Different Paths of Yoga: An Overview

Dr. Ajay Bhardwaj

Sr. Asst. Professor, Dept of Communication, DSVV, Haridwar, India

Abstract

Yoga is the union of the individual soul with the supreme soul. Yoga is a practical path to self-realization, a means of attaining enlightenment by purifying the entire being. Yoga is the science that teaches us the method of uniting the individual soul with the Universal soul, of merging the individual will in the cosmic will; of experiencing our oneness with the divine consciousness. We have the description of the aim of yoga in almost all the holy books. Almost all the scriptures have declared that self – realization is the supreme aim of human life and this can be attained only by the constant practice of yoga. The different paths of yoga whether they be karma yoga, *bhakti* yoga, *jnana* yoga or raja yoga, they pave the way for the lifting up of human consciousness to a higher and nobler realm of light, love and life with divine harmony and joy.

Key words: Self-realization, Individual soul, Supreme soul, Consciousness, Paths of yoga

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***Corresponding Author:**

Dr. Ajay Bhardwaj, Sr. Asst. Professor, Dept of Communication, DSVV, Haridwar, India

E-mail: dsvvajay@gmail.com

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Introduction:

Yoga: Meaning and Concept

Before exploring different paths of yoga, it is of course, desirable to know the meaning and concept of yoga first. Therefore let us first see what yoga is: This question can be answered well if we begin with the meaning and definitions of yoga. The word yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root 'yuj', which means to yoke or to unite. In later times, however, another technical meaning came to be associated with the term, and this is derived from "yujirsamadha", which means "contemplation", or "absorption".ⁱThe oldest use of the word yoga, as found in the vedic literature (e.g. Rigveda 114.9, Atharvaveda VI, 91.1) indicates a union of various things.ⁱⁱ*The Kathopanishada* states: "The supreme path begins when the five senses and the mind are stilled and when the intellect is silent. This tranquility of the senses is yoga."ⁱⁱⁱThe Yoga Vashista defines yoga "as a device by which one go across the ocean of suffering; i.e. yoga is a means of living the life of a jivanmukta (liberated soul) which is the ultimate end of human life."^{iv}*Agni Puran* (183/1/3) states; "When the light of knowledge dawns on chitta, it becomes concentrated and becomes like BrahmaHimself; and thus occurs the communion of the individual soul with the supreme soul. Such a concentrated state of chitta is called yoga. *The Gita* defines yoga thus: Yoga is equanimity in success and failure.^vYoga is excellence in action.^{vi}Yoga is the dissociation of the association with suffering.^{vii}*MaharshiPatanjali* in his *Yoga-Sutras* says: "Yoga is the inhibition (nirodha) of the modifications (vrtti) of the mind."^{viii}*Hatha Yoga Pradipika* states: "The yoga is a state of ecstasy or trance"^{ix}.*Swami Vivekanand*says: "Yoga is restraining the mind stuff (chitta) from taking various forms (vrttis)^x. Maharshi Aurobindo

says: "Yoga is a methodological effort towards self-perfection by development of potentialities latent within the individual."^{xi}

Aim of Yoga

The ultimate aim of yoga is to unite the human soul with the universal soul. The aim of yoga is to tear the veil that keeps man confined within the human dimension of consciousness. Yoga is radically different from the normal consciousness of human beings. This is a point of paramount importance for every seeker of yoga to bear in mind-which one passes beyond death only on realizing Him. There is no other way of escape from the cycle of births and deaths.

Moreover yoga is the only way to sustain one's spiritual reality in the midst of life's turmoil and to discipline one's inner awareness until he attains liberation. Yoga can be considered among those highly developed spiritual disciplines that enable man to cope with the tragic aspects of life. Ordinarily a man is lost in his own confused thoughts and feelings, but when yoga is attained the personal consciousness becomes stilled like a lamp in a windless place and it is then possible for the embodied spirit to know itself as apart from the manifestations to which it is accustomed, and to become aware of its own nature. Yoga is, of course excellent for physical, mental and spiritual well-being. The goal of yoga is essentially to cause the mind to become like zero. In fact, the goal of yoga is to zero out thoughts, to zero - out the mind and realize the supreme and become like the supreme. All the systems of yoga practiced up to now had almost the same goal and purpose. That is to raise the consciousness to a stage of bliss and fix it there.^{xii}

Different Paths of Yoga

There are different paths of yoga, all leading to the same goal of self-realization. All the paths of yoga are like different spokes of a wheel, they all meet at the same centre: self-realization. Let me briefly consider of these different paths: *Raja Yoga* -Raja Yoga refers to the system of yoga that is described in the yoga sutras of Maharshi Patanjali. In this ancient text Maharshi Patanjali describes eight stages of yoga which are known collectively as Raja Yoga. *Maharshi Patanjali* in his yoga sutra 2-29 says: “*Yamanyamasnapranayamapratyaharadharanadhyansamadhyostavangani*” Meaning: Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi are the steps of Astanga Yoga.

A raja yogi ascends the yogic ladder through the eight steps the gets ethical training in the beginning to purify himself by the practice of Yama and Niyama. Then he steadies his posture. Then he practices Pranayama to steady his mind and purify the Nadis. Then by the practice of Pratyahara, Dharna and Dhyana he gets Samadhi.¹³

Hatha Yoga: The word ‘Hatha’ is made up of two bija mantra: ‘Ha’ and ‘tha’. ‘Ha’ stands for the sun or Pingla Nadi and ‘tha’ for the moon or Ida nadi. Basically the union of these two nadies is called Hatha Yoga. When Ida and pingla unites together the prana starts flowing into susumna and the dormant power kundalini, which is lying in the muladhar chakra awakens, rises and enters susumna and passing through all the six chakra reaches the highest peak Brahmarandhra or sahasrara, and attain the oneness. This is the union of sakti and siva or Atma and Parmatman. This process destroys the ignorance of the aspirant and illuminates his heart and soul. The Hatha Yoga includes a number of physical

exercises that aim at rendering the body fit for meditation. By these exercises, the body is tuned so that it absorbs a greater quantity of cosmic energy. This technique disciplines the body and helps in rousing the untapped-spiritual energy and uniting the individual soul with the universal soul.¹⁴

Mantra Yoga--Mantra Yoga is the union of the individual soul with the supreme soul by the chanting of the manta.¹⁵ ‘Mananattrayateitimantrah’- by the manana (constant thinking or recollection) of which one is released from the bondage of birth and death, is mantra.¹⁶ It is said that one can achieve the ultimate salvation or union with supreme consciousness by chanting the mantras, which is the aim of mantra yoga.¹⁷ The manta itself is Devta (deity), manifesting in a sound body. Constant repetition of the mantra with faith, devotion and purity bestows on the aspirant illumination, peace, eternal bliss and salvation. By constant repetition of the manta the aspirant imbibes the virtues and powers of the deity that presides over the mantra. Mantras are in the form of praise and appeal to the deities, craving for help and mercy.

Laya Yoga--Laya Yoga is the complete absorption of the mind. The mind is absorbed in the divine OM sound, which is the cosmic sound of vibration within.¹⁸In the highest ecstatic state, vasanas, samskaras are neutralized, preparing the mind for its own dissolution or absorption. Laya Yoga is the yoga of absorption. It underscores absorption in meditation, merging the mind and breath in the divine. In this practice the yogi immerses himself in the Universe, becoming a part of the Universal body.²⁰Laya Yoga is a form of yoga that focuses on listening to nada, or inner sounds, which can be heard even with closed ears. Nada comes in different

variations, ranging from bee hums to ocean waves.¹⁹By focusing on nadas, the mind will become relaxed, and will be oblivious to different distractions around. Laya Yoga makes it possible to go through difficulties and overcome negativities, thus it is called the yoga of absorption. Laya yoga retains the transcendental self after yogis dissolve themselves meditatively. This is considered as the higher stage of Hatha Yoga as one of the grand spiritual paths.

Karma Yoga -Karma Yoga means the union with God through selfless actions. Karma is literally translated as 'action' which everyone in this world performs, whether consciously or unconsciously. When the word yoga is added to the word karma, then it means that any action performed without associating oneself with the fruits of the karma. Actually it denotes an inner attitude towards action. The action performed without egoism or expectation of any return is Karma Yoga²⁰. One loses his identity while working, only selfless work remains. This state is very difficult to achieve. Generally some rewards or outcome follows the work and one is attached to this reward or incentive. This is not the Karma Yoga. Non-attachment with the work and becoming the perfect instrument of the super consciousness in this manifested universe is the ultimate aim of karma yoga²¹

Jnana Yoga--Gyan yoga is the yoga of wisdom. This path emphasizes on the true knowledge regarding the nature of the self. Since ignorance (obscures) the self from achieving salvation, the aim of this path is to destroy ignorance by discrimination and contemplation on Truth.²²Lord Krishna in the 38th verse of the 4th chapter of the Gita says: "*Na hi jnanenasadrishampavitramihvidyate.*" Meaning; nothing indeed purifies in this world like

wisdom. He who lives in self-harmony finds it (wisdom) in time within himself, by himself.²³

Thus we can say that Gyan Yoga is the process of self-realization through illuminative wisdom (self-knowledge). It is not a method by which we try to find rational answers to eternal questions, rather it is a part of meditation leading to self-enquiry and self-realization Jnana Yoga teaches that God is everywhere and in everything. It does not differentiate between the self and God.

Bhakti Yoga-Bhakti Yoga is the path by which God may be realized through love and devotion. The term Bhakti comes from the root 'Bhaj', which means 'to be attached to God'. Bhakti is intense devotion and supreme attachment to God. It is pure, unselfish, divine love.²⁴ There is not a bit of bargaining or expectation here. This pure love leads the devotee to an eternal union with God. "Bhakti Yoga is yoga of devotion or complete faith. This faith is in the God or supreme consciousness in any of the forms. It may be Lord Rama, Krishna, Christ, Mohammed, Buddha etc. It may be a Guru for his disciples. Important thing is that the person interested in following this path should have very strong emotional bond with the object of faith. The flow of emotional energy is directed to this object. Mostly people suppress their emotions and that often reflects in the form of physical and mental disorders. This Bhakti Yoga releases those suppressed emotions and brings the purification of the inner self. Gradually the practitioner loses the self-identity and becomes one with the object of faith, this is a state of self-realization."

Conclusion:

Thus after a careful observation of the different paths of yoga it becomes very clear that they all lead to the same goal, that is self-realization. Roads are different but the destination is the

same. It depends on the practitioner which path he chooses as per his temperament. Some may take one path as a key in order to experience self-realization, while others take another path,

but the fact is that there is absolutely no difference between the various practices of yoga.

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