

CHAPTER 11

PATHS OF YOGA

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The Sanskrit word *Yoga* is derived from the root *yuj*, similar to the word ‘yoke.’ In the spiritual context, *yoga* is that which helps one unite with Supreme Consciousness. The ultimate goal of spirituality in Hinduism is to become aware of the Divine presence everywhere, at all times, in oneself, in every other human being, and in the whole of creation. Hindus may seek to connect with the Divine as an all-pervasive Consciousness, *Brahman*, or as a presence that dwells within one’s heart or as the Personality of Godhead. Recognizing that persons have varying spiritual understanding, physical and intellectual capacities and even interest in the Divine, Hindu scriptures offer a variety of spiritual paths or *yogas* to help all seekers progress toward this goal, each in their own way. A key component of all *yoga* is to transform the mind, making it clear and calm; the techniques vary among the different paths of *yoga*.

Karma Yoga: the Yoga of Action

Actions commonly reflect personal likes or dislikes, and are undertaken seeking personal gain or the benefit of those to whom one is attached. Spiritual evolution requires that all actions, including speech and the thoughts that lead to actions, are unselfish and derive from a dedication to the common good. The path of *Karma Yoga* is about being engaged in purposeful action without any expectation of personal reward, here or in after-life, and achieving freedom from fear and sorrow. The components of this path are:

- Doing one’s duties willingly, cheerfully and with love. This helps overcome likes/dislikes and reduces avoidable stress.
- Surrender the fruit of actions to God. Recognize that the outcome of one’s actions is determined by forces beyond one’s control. Give God the credit for successful actions.
- Do good because it is the right thing to do. Offer all actions as contributions to nature’s cosmic flow presided over by God. Act as an instrument of God.
- Acknowledge that the power to act is itself a gift from God and gratefully surrender all actions to God.

Raja Yoga: the Yoga of Meditation, the “Royal Path”:

Raja Yoga is the systematic practice of precise techniques to become aware of one’s internal energies, make the mind clear and calm and know the Self. This path consists of eight steps: exercising specified disciplines in daily life; cultivating and refining internal awareness; physical postures to improve health and gain awareness of internal energy flows; breathing exercises to access the nervous system and bring clarity to the mind; turning the mind inward, away from the distracting influence of sense organs; making the mind one-pointed in concentration; focusing the mind in meditation; and, finally, achieving *Samadhi*, a super-conscious state of mind that leads to intuitive wisdom and direct experience of the Self. This path requires good health, discipline and a dedication to regular practice.

Jnana Yoga: Path of Knowledge, Vedanta:

Practitioners of the path of knowledge strive to realize the Self by removing ignorance about our essential nature, our relation with the world around us, and the origin and destiny of the universe. The basic technique used on this path is seeking the Truth through deep intellectual enquiry and vigorous debate. The first stage is the study of scripture, mainly the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Brahma Sutras*, along with commentaries and expository texts by learned teachers. The second stage is sustained reflection on the messages of these scriptures and efforts to resolve doubts about their meaning. The third stage is use of meditation to fully internalize the distinction between Pure Consciousness, the eternal, all-pervasive, changeless and blissful Reality and all the rest that is ephemeral and the product of the mind. The conclusions of *Vedanta* are fully accepted only when the statements in scriptures are found to be consistent with reason and the seeker's own direct experience. This path requires a high degree of intellectual rigor, the capacity for patient reflection, a burning desire for liberation and the ability to detach from sensory pleasures in order to concentrate on spiritual enquiry.

Bhakti Yoga: the Yoga of Devotion, Love of God:

The essence of *Bhakti Yoga* is intense love of God, characterized by constant remembrance and an unconditional desire to serve God in both mortal and celestial realms. On this path, devotion is its own reward and the practitioner renounces all other desires, even the desire for *moksha*, liberation. All desires and emotions are directed toward God and the devotee loves God with at least as much intensity as others might love sense pleasures or worldly possessions. In brief, the devotee rests his/her mind and heart in God and consecrates all actions in service of God. The main steps in the path of devotion are:

- Guard against bad habits that pollute body and mind;
- Seek the company of other devotees; listen to and sing about the glories of God;
- Chant God's name, worship God and remember God incessantly to purify the mind;
- Serve all beings with humility and in an attitude of submission to God's glory;
- Cultivate an intimate relationship with God as a dear friend, as a child or as a lover;
- Be open to God's grace by which alone one attains supreme devotion;

The scriptures urge devotees to go beyond mere ritual worship and stress the importance of serving others. The best devotee is one who sees God dwelling in oneself and in all beings, and all beings dwelling in oneself and in God.

Tantra: Esoteric, All-embracing Path:

The central theme of *Tantra* is that the entire universe is one indivisible whole as a manifestation of the Divine Mother, the inseparable union of Pure Consciousness (*Shiva*) and primordial energy (*Shakti*); and that one who has pierced the secrets of the universe can attain all goals, both spiritual and material. The focal point of *tantra* is worship of the Divine Mother in all Her aspects, both creative and transformative. Declaring that each human being is a microcosm embodying the entire universe,

tantric practitioners seek to master their own mind, senses and body as a means of knowing the universe. Tantrics see the Divine in and through every experience; and use every object and experience in the world as tools for spiritual growth. Practitioners embrace a very wide variety of practices including the use of sacred sound, sacred designs, sacred gestures, sacred objects, gems, astrology, alchemy, ritual sacrifice, fire-offerings, prayer and meditation. Building on the techniques of *Raja Yoga*, advanced techniques are used to mobilize the infinite energy that dwells dormant within oneself. When these practices are employed for personal gain and transgress ethics and morality, they cause fear and revulsion. When the goal is spiritual, the path of *tantra* is systematic, comprehensive and effective.

The Yogas are Complementary: Far from being mutually exclusive, the various paths of *yoga* are strongly complementary. A Hindu spiritual seeker typically draws on more than one path in practice. *Bhakti Yoga*, *Jnana Yoga* and *Raja Yoga* have been described as the two wings and the tail of a bird in flight. *Karma Yoga* is recognized as powerful in purifying the mind and a necessary foundation for all spiritual practice. Each path contributes in its own way to the achievement of spiritual goals. Further, these paths converge at the culmination of spiritual practice. A deep practice of the path of knowledge leads to the flowering of devotion; and the deep practice of the path of devotion leads to the emergence of knowledge.