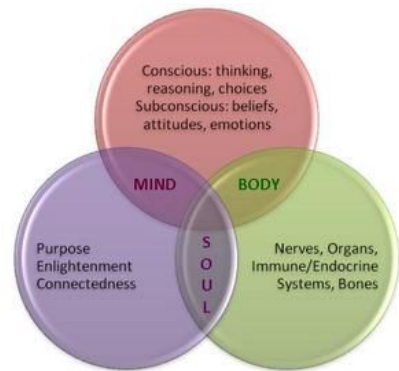


Yoga: Paths to Moksha

In Hinduism, yoga encompasses a variety of systems of philosophy-based practices which outline how an individual can unite body, mind, and soul, or his or her actions and thoughts with divinity, in the quest for *moksha* (liberation/enlightenment). The term yoga is from the Sanskrit language and means union. While many people around the world associate yoga with physical exercises, they may not be aware of the other, often considered more important aspects, that are integral to a variety of yogas. These aspects may include moral values, ethical practices, posture, breath, meditation, focused awareness, devotion and worship of God, and scriptural study.



Hindus are encouraged to find a yoga that fits their individual temperament and personality and which best utilizes their strengths to ultimately get closer to achieving *moksha*. The help of a guru, or spiritual teacher, is important, as Hindus believe a guru can guide them to their unique yogic path and teach them the techniques necessary for spiritual progress. There are a number of varieties of yoga, but the four detailed here are amongst those enumerated in the Bhagavad Gita.

Bhakti Yoga - The Path of Loving Devotion



A painting depicting Bhakti saints in spiritual rapture.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Prince Krishna, whom Hindus believe to be in incarnation of God, tells Prince Arjun that people turn to God under four conditions -- when they are in trouble, when they want something desperately, when they seek to understand the nature of God, and when they simply love God without any expectations. This last scenario of love is bhakti, or loving devotion. Hindus believe that through bhakti, people can connect to the Divine in a very personal way. Hinduism offers many ways to relate to God and develop this love. Hindus may see God as father, mother, master, friend, lover, child, or even enemy (because Hindu teachings observe that even hate inspires one to think about God constantly).

The following are specific methods that Hinduism details as ways for the individual to deepen their connection with the Divine:

Satsang Bhakti: Satsang calls for individuals to keep company with fellow devotees. Through mutual support with people at differing points along their spiritual path, the devotee may find continual inspiration.

Shravana Bhakti: This method involves listening to stories, glories, and plays of the various incarnations of God with bhakti, or loving devotion. Listening to these stories is thought to help a devotee submerge their mind in loving thoughts of God.

Kirtan Bhakti: Kirtan means singing the names and songs about God. Many Hindus find devotional music to be a soul stirring form of worship. Many types of devotional music exist, including bhajans and kirtans, abhangas, and music from Carnatic and Hindustani schools.

Smarana Bhakti: This method calls for remembering God, and all the superlative qualities associated with the Divine constantly, without interruption.

Archana Bhakti: Archana is ritual worship. Hindus may sit down before their home altar to do a ritual of worship and prayer. Archanas can also be performed by Hindu devotees in the temple with a priest facilitating the ritual worship. The ritual may be simple or more elaborate and involves physical motions that require the individual to focus and stay concentrated on God.

Atma Nivedana Bhakti: Atma Nivedana means complete self-surrender to God. This bhakti requires the individual to offer not just their stream of thoughts, but also their continual awareness back to God. Hindu teachings explain that if the individual treats all of their thoughts and actions as offerings to God, they are more likely to think and act more positively and selflessly.

Jnana Yoga - The Path of Knowledge

Jnana calls for self realization through intellectual pursuit of spiritual knowledge. In Hinduism, intellect is seen as a vehicle that can point a seeker in the correct direction to finding God, though it is a difficult and rigorous path on its own. In the Bhagavad Gita, Prince Krishna tells Prince Arjun that he who controls their senses and withdraws their mind into the immortal self is enlightened. Hindu teachings say that this is the goal of those who tread the path of *jnana* yoga. There are three steps to spiritual illumination on this path:

Step One: *Shravana* - Intensive study. The individual must listen to the words of a guru and read the scriptures carefully. Once the intellect is prepared, a person can proceed to step two.

Step Two: *Manana* - Deep contemplation. The individual must contemplate what they have learned intellectually until they own it. There must be a deep understanding and living out of scriptural teachings. Once a person has truly understood and applied what they have read, the last step is appropriate.



Students learning the Vedas in both the traditional oral tradition and with books.

Step Three: *Nidhidhyasana* - Experiencing the Divine. After reading and thinking about the Divine, the last step is for a person to dive deep into consciousness to experience God.

According to Hinduism, one who embarks on this path may go through several stages of enlightenment before achieving moksha. The Hindu concept of *Jnana* yoga aims to make one aware of who they are and who they always have been (the eternal soul) while making it clear that intellectual understanding is not equivalent with self realization.

Raja Yoga or Ashtanga/Classical Yoga

Raja means royal, and this is the path that is described by Prince Krishna as having been taken by the kings in ancient times. This path is also known as ashtanga, which means eight-limbed, as there are that many components to this path.

1. Yama- Morals
2. Niyama- Ethics
3. Asana- Posture
4. Pranayama- Control of the breath
5. Pratyahara- Control of the senses
6. Dharana- Concentration
7. Dhyana- Meditation
8. Samadhi- One-pointed absorption

Sage Patanjali compiled the Yoga Sutras, a text which is understood to be one of the earliest codifications of extant yogic practices. He outlined yoga as an eight step spiritual system or ashtanga. Hindus believe that by clearing the conscience through ethical behavior, stabilizing the body through correct meditative posture, and controlling the breath to steady the nervous system, the individual is ready to experience God. *Dharana* and *dhyana* propel the individual towards *samadhi* or the experience of soul consciousness.



Many mistake asana or posture to be yoga, but yoga is a spiritual practice that encompasses far more.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna tells Arjun that this is a difficult path, but that through practice, one can control their mind effectively enough to attain moksha. The type of focus and meditation that this path calls for occasionally gives the practitioner certain supernatural powers that many associate with yogis - the ability to see the future, move objects, or walk on water. However, Patanjali encourages those who discover these abilities not to use them, as they are distractors that stop the individual from achieving their true spiritual goal of experiencing unity.

Karma Yoga - The Path of Selfless and Righteous Action

Many Hindus believe that Prince Krishna gave Prince Arjuna the basics of the path of Karma Yoga during their conversation, which the Bhagavad Gita is believed to be a record of.

“Surrender the fruits of your actions to Me. Perform your duty without any expectation of reward. Do what you have to do because it’s the right thing to do, not because there’s something you want out of it.”

Hindus believe that when they renounce the fruit of their actions, sacrificing all results, good and bad, to God, they are no longer emotionally bound to the suffering or benefit of their actions either. An individual must actively engage in life, fulfilling their dharma on a daily basis as a fireman, stock broker, a doctor, or camel trainer. Inaction is not a viable way to move forward on a spiritual quest. According to Hinduism, people should do the best they can, not because they’re anticipating rewards from their hard work, but because they are doing God’s work. All work, from training the camel to sitting in meditation, is equal and considered *seva* (selfless service), as long as it is done with the same awareness and the lack of demand for anything in return. Hence, Hindus believe that karma yoga brings peace through action. By cultivating a state of desirelessness and egolessness, the depository of past lives’ karma drops away, unbinding the soul from samsara, the wheel of birth and rebirth.



Helping those in need can be a form of karma yoga, so long as one does not have any expectations of gaining something in return.

According to Hindu teachings, yoga can be any spiritual practice that helps one experience Divinity. These are not meant to be mutually exclusive paths, but rather complementary to each other. Hindus believe that to truly experience *moksha*, one must understand and combine the various paths or yogas that best meet their personal needs and temperament. Each individual’s path to enlightenment will be as unique as the individual themselves.

Key Takeaways

- Yoga means union, and is anything that helps one experience God
- Bhakti yoga is the path of devotion
- Jnana yoga is the path of knowledge
- Raja yoga is the path of discipline
- Karma Yoga is the path of selfless action

Additional Resources:

This video from the Hindu Students Association explains the concept of Yoga well.

HSA video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNcx8H7pcMg>