

What Kind of Yogi are You?

"Knowledge, devotion, and work are complementary both when we seek the goal and after we attain it. We may climb the mountain from different paths but the view from the summit is identical for all."

– Shri Radha Krishnan

Are you confused by all the different kinds of yoga that are out there today? As an avid researcher on the subject, I am intrigued by all the different definitions I find, and am always amazed by the sheer amount of dialogue that is happening about the benefits of Yoga on a local and national level. Many people associate the term Yoga with a physical practice, but it is also a life practice that is both timeless and limitless. And while I could write an entire article on the varied styles of modern Yoga that exist today, I find that it makes more sense to look at the roots of Yoga for an outline of the different types of practice. This approach will open up the consideration of how Yoga can be adapted to suit personal dispositions, and help individuals form a meaningful practice that they can sustain in daily life. It is easy to see how this might differ from other philosophies, many of which try to put practitioners into a box and say "This is the way to live." Yoga takes the opposite approach and helps people discover who they are at the very core of their being and then offers practices that compliment that true nature.



pleasure and pain, loss and gain, failure and success. The entire story serves as a practical guide to maintaining a balanced state of mind through the different practices of Yoga. The term Yoga, when used as a practice of uniting the mundane with the highest reality, can be applied to a variety of paths. While each path differs, their fundamental goal of Self-realization is the same. For the purpose of this article, we will look at the 5 major branches of Yoga.

- Karma Yoga:** The Yoga of Action or Selfless-Service
- Bhakti Yoga:** The Yoga of Devotion
- Raja Yoga:** The Yoga of Meditation
- Jnana Yoga:** The Yoga of Knowledge or Wisdom
- Tantric Yoga:** The Yoga of Health and Wellness

There are many ancient texts that lay the foundation of our modern understanding of Yoga. The Bhagavad-Gita is one of those texts. The term Yoga covers a wide range of meanings, but in the context of the Bhagavad Gita, Yoga is viewed as a unified outlook, serenity of mind, skillfulness in action and the ability to stay attuned to the Higher Self and the Infinite Consciousness (God, Goddess, Nature etc.). According to the Bhagavad Gita, the goal of life is to free the mind and intellect from their complexities in order to remain focused on dedicating one's actions to the divine.

Yoga can be considered a philosophy of living in the Gita. As Arjuna, the main character of the story, searches for answers to his dilemmas, he is shown how to go beyond normal modes of thinking and is shown ways to transcend attachment and think beyond the duality of

Karma Yoga is a way of using selfless service, or the more traditional work life as a means of spiritual development. This path teaches practitioners to view actions that are as trivial as washing the dishes all the way to big decisions in the workplace as opportunities to cultivate a selfless attitude of service. While practicing Karma Yoga, one uses their individual gifts for the betterment of their selves and society. The theme of non-attachment to the results is one of main themes of the Gita and it relates to learning how to live in the present moment. Full concentration on an action is a means to cultivating a peaceful mind. In other words, Yoga or union is established when the person is totally focused on the task at hand and does not dream about the result. Work is infused with a sense of higher purpose, and the smallest mundane acts are imbued with a super-conscious awareness.

Raja Yoga is the Yoga of meditation. Meditation can be defined as making the mind one-pointed and going beyond the information of the five senses, as well as

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beyond the thoughts of the mind. While difficult, control of the mind is possible by focusing the mind on an eternal principle. The body is stilled, and the senses stilled in the process of purifying the mind. The benefits of controlling the thoughts are at the root of mind-body healing. When the mind is controlled, it is easier to control the body and its impulses. In addition to its sublime pursuit of purity, meditation also has practical benefits of improving self-control, reducing stress and creating space for emotional transformation.

Bhakti Yoga or the Yoga of Devotion refers to practices such as scripture study, repetition of sacred syllables, chanting and the ongoing cultivation of a connection to the divine reality. The term is often translated as “devotion”, though increasingly “participation” is being used as a more accurate rendering, since it conveys a fully engaged relationship with the divine. This form of practice emphasizes devotion and practice above ritual and is typically represented in terms of human relationships, most often as beloved-lover, friend-friend, parent-child, and master-servant. It may refer to devotion to a spiritual teacher, to a personal form of God, or to divinity without form. Belonging to a particular tradition is not exclusive—devotion to one deity does not preclude worship of another.¹

Jnana Yoga is the practice of gaining the highest knowledge. The mind, limited by its materialistic boundaries cannot fully discern the unchanging nature of reality. Jnana Yoga focuses on the oneness of all life as the means to enlightenment. Intellectualism is not required for an aspirant of Jnana Yoga, as book learning lacks the experiential quality of realized knowledge. A discriminating spiritual nature helps the practitioner grasp the meaning of life, which described by the Gita, is realizing that, “I (the divine reality) am the taste of pure water and the radiance of the sun and moon. I am the sacred word and the sound heard in air, and the courage of human beings. I am the sweet fragrance in the earth and the radiance of fire; I am the life in every creature and the striving of the spiritual aspirant. (7:8-9)”

In looking at different Yogic life paths, it is also important to consider Tantric Yoga or the Yoga of Health and Wellness. It is not directly mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita but has gained tremendous popularity in the modern yogic culture. Historically, Tantra has had a considerable number of texts devoted to its practice, and some date all the way back to the 5th-9th century AD. Tantra is different from other traditions because it takes the whole person, and his/her worldly

desires into account. Other spiritual traditions ordinarily teach that desire for material pleasures and spiritual aspirations are mutually exclusive, setting the stage for an endless internal struggle. Tantra itself means “to weave, to expand, and to spread”, and according to tantrik masters, the fabric of life can provide true and ever-lasting fulfillment only when all the threads are woven according to the pattern designated by nature. Tantra as a path is systematic and comprehensive. Its practices pertain to Hatha Yoga, Pranayama, Mudras, Rituals, Nada (Sound) Yoga, Mantra, Mandala, Visualization, Alchemy, Ayurveda, Astrology, and hundreds of esoteric practices intended to generate worldly and spiritual harmony.²

Individual yoga practitioners usually use a combination of the different types of Yoga paths. At different stages of life, different types of yogic practices will become more or less relevant. The young and old have the time and need to contemplate the nature of reality and have a higher quotient of Jnana Yoga. At mid-life the mind and body are in peak condition and attention to Karma Yoga dominates. Being married, having children and taking care of family is a naturally Bhakti way of life. Meditation/psychological practices will be relevant the person who appreciates finding a quiet mind – for many people this can be later in life. The Tantric or Health practices are practiced by all to a certain degree, but will be the main focus for certain kinds of practitioners. It is important to know that one form or style is not any better than the other - they are simply different ways of getting to the same place. The key is to create a deep sense of personal experience with the tools that are available to you. As your needs change over time, so will your practice. ▲



References:

¹<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhakti>

²http://hinduism.about.com/od/tantra/a/what_is_tantra.htm