The Paths of Yoga

By now you'll understand that yoga is not simply the practice of postures, and while our first experience of yoga will often be the physical practice we gradually realise that there is more to yoga than we first thought. Over time there is often a realisation that the practice of yoga is a deeply spiritual practice, and that our first steps on the spiritual journey lead us on the path of discovery – uncovering who we truly are.

There are many paths on this journey, and four main paths are described in the Bhagavad Gita:

Karma Yoga
Bhakti Yoga
Raja Yoga
Jnana Yoga

While these are distinct paths, they are not necessarily intended to be travelled exclusively. Our practice is most likely to be a blend of aspects of each of these paths, all of which lead to the same place (Samadhi).

"These four paths of Yoga are aspects of the whole that is called Yoga.
The four paths of Yoga work together like fingers on a hand".
Swami Jnaneshvara Bharati (Swamij)

Each unique individual will have their own predisposition and preferences, and this will influence the path which may be the most dominant.

Karma Yoga: The Yoga of Action

Karma is translated as deed or action and Karma Yoga is the action of helping others, with those actions infused with seva – the Sanskrit word for selfless service. This is the service where there is no desire for personal gain or expectation of reward. Deepak Chopra explains that "true practice of Karma yoga leads to spontaneous detachment from outcome and one-pointed, focussed mindfulness as you perform your actions".

"Whatever comes - success or failure, praise or blame, victory or defeat –
we can give our best with a clear unruffled mind" Eknath Easwaran

Karma Yoga is also described as "the yoga of work" (Swami Sarvapriyananda) and the way in which we can bring our spiritual practice into our everyday activities and interactions at work. Therefore, Karma Yoga is well suited to our life as a 'householder', that is one who has responsibilities such as family, work and community engagements.

How can we bring aspects of Karma Yoga into our daily life?

- Random Acts of Kindness
- Listening to a friend who is suffering (free from judgement and with an open heart and mind, and without the need to 'fix')
- Doing a job well for its own sake
- Empowering others to succeed or to have the ability to solve their own problems
- Mentoring / coaching / peer support

- In your work or role as a parent/carer/neighbour/employee, ask “how can I serve today” or “how can I help others today”.
- Working to promote equality and social justice
- Non-violent activism

While karma yoga is focussed on serving others, this is by no means at the detriment to oneself either physically or emotionally. In caring for our own health and wellbeing (body, mind, spirit) and establishing healthy boundaries, we are better placed to serve others and shine our light out into the world so that others may be touched by it.

“Service is love in action” Jivana Heyman

Raja Yoga: The Yoga of Meditation

Raja means ‘king’ and thus Raja Yoga is the royal path. Raja yoga encompasses Patanjali’s system of yoga and the 8 limbs, and is often referred to as the path of meditation – a journey inwards, or the path of the mind.

Sutra 1.2: Yogas citta vrtti nirodhah: *Yoga is stilling the fluctuations of the mind*

Sutra 1.3: Tada drastuh svarupe’vasthanam; *Then the Seer (Self) abides in Its own nature*

“*Our job is to look into our own mind, examine its powerful tendencies, and work hard to make it crystal clear*” Pandit Rajmani Tigunait. It is through this work on bringing clarity to the mind that we see our true Self.

You can practice this path through:

- Applying the yama and niyama (refer back to your notes and handouts from Day 3)
- Yoga postures (asana)
- Taking time to be still and withdrawing the senses from external distractions (pratyahara)
- Breath awareness, and breathing practices (pranayama)
- Focussed awareness (dharana) and meditation (dhyana)

Through sustained practice you may reach Samadhi (enlightened living, complete realisation of the true Self).

In his commentary of the Bhagavad Gita, Eknath Easwaran explains one of the significant teachings on Raja Yoga in Chapter 6:

“Wherever the mind wanders, Krishna says, it must be brought back to its source, it must learn to rest in the Self. Once it is at home in the depths of contemplation, the mind becomes steady, like an upright unflickering flame in a windless place. In this deep meditation, and only there, can the human being find true fulfilment”.

Jnana Yoga: The Yoga of Knowledge & Intellect

This path of yoga promotes knowledge of the true Self through self-study and study of the ancient yoga texts. Through this study, the veils of illusion or incorrect understanding are dissolved and our true nature is revealed.

"They live in wisdom who see themselves in all and all in them"
Extract from Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 6 Verse 55

Desikachar tells us in the Heart of Yoga that "all knowledge lies hidden within us – we only have to discover it". As we discover this inner wisdom through yoga, we are able to see things more clearly and as they truly are, and we become able to make wise choices in life. Will this bring me peace, gentleness to my heart or stillness of mind? Or will it cause some degree of suffering?

We can practice this path through:

- Meditation and contemplation
- Seeking the guidance of an experienced teacher
- The study of texts such as the Sutras, Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita
- Discussions with fellow students on the deeper aspects of yoga
- Self enquiry, reflection and journaling
- Connect often to your intuition and be guided by what it has to tell you
- Keep learning: attend workshops and events that deepen your understanding and experience of yoga

"When you open a new yoga book, take a new yoga class, or attend a new training,
you don't need to throw away everything you know and start again.
Instead, be discriminating and consider all that you're learning in context.
Carefully consider new ideas and practices. Ruminate on them and check in with how they feel to you. If they seem true and useful, then digest them; if not, spit them out.
Trust your intuition and allow your study and practice to refine your understanding…
…and give form to what you know in your heart".
Jivana Heyman

While it's great to seek wisdom and read books to deepen your knowledge, we can also run the risk of intellectualising the practices and even creating a mind that is busier than ever – overwhelmed with facts and concepts. So Jnana Yoga isn't purely a practice of immersing ourselves in books or study - it's equally important to apply the learning in a practical way. True wisdom will often be revealed in moments discovered in everyday life or meditation.

"To learn and not to do is really not to learn. To know and not to do is not to know"
Stephen R Covey

Bhakti Yoga: The Yoga of Devotion

Bhakti yoga is the path of devotion to the Divine. This is traditionally a devotion to God, but if that word doesn't resonate with you then consider it as a devotion to love and seeing the Divine nature in all that is.

"By delving into our hearts, we pass the boundaries of our limited minds and recognise the Divine Consciousness as primordial energy within each living thing.
A person, an animal, a falling leaf, or a sinking stone – all are part of the Divine.
When we make this realisation with our hearts, we are drawn in to love the Divine energy in all things, and the whole world becomes our beloved"
Nischala Joy Devi

Here's some ideas on how you can practice Bhakti Yoga:

- Chanting mantra
- Kirtan
- Seeing the Divinity within all beings (even if their behaviour is challenging)
- Prayer
- Discovering ways in which you can incorporate your existing faith into your practice
- Devote your practice to your heart and the divinity within
- Create an alter where you practice, placing meaningful and inspiring objects here
- If you have no specific faith, practice devotion to Nature and Mother Earth
- Throughout your day, or if you are finding it hard making a decision, pause and ask yourself "What would love do now"? (Thanks to Louise Lloyd for this inspiration)
- Practice Surya Namaskar as a devotional practice, honouring the life-giving energy of the Sun
- Become devoted to your practice – honour the time as a special time for you to bring yourself home to your heart. You might also mark this by incorporating a small ritual of some sort e.g. lighting incense, beginning with Om.
- Find out about Hindu deities, or learn more about a faith that resonates with you
- Learn more about a faith that you might be intuitively drawn to

"If the only prayer you say in your life is 'Thank You' that would suffice"
Eckhart Tolle

Which path are you travelling?

Notice that often we will say that we've not practiced yoga today (and beat ourselves up over it!), when what we might actually mean is that we've not practiced asana (postures). Through understanding the paths of yoga, can you see how each day you're likely practicing yoga in some way? Perhaps doing some shopping for an elderly neighbour (Karma Yoga), taking a few moments focussing on your breath or meditating (Raja Yoga), feeling connected as you pause in wonder at a sunset and being thankful for its presence (Bhakti Yoga), or reading a book that inspires you in your spiritual life (Jnana Yoga).

You may be drawn more to one path than the others, and naturally incorporate one more than the others. Swami Jnaneshvara Bharati speaks of choosing a path:

"Although the four paths of Yoga work together, along with the companion aspects of Yoga, it is extremely useful to be mindful of which of the four paths of Yoga is most in alignment with your own predispositions. By identifying that path it can be emphasised in life, and the others can be wisely, lovingly used to enhance the chosen path of Yoga".

And remember, this is YOUR path and while the ultimate destination may be the same the journey is unique to you. The spiritual path is not linear. It has its ups and downs, twists and turns, sometimes it's messy – mostly it's joyful. So honour where you are, be gently guided by your heart and embrace the journey. (Continued overleaf)…

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