

Wisdom, Devotion & Right Action:

Three Paths of Yoga

By Nancy Jackson

Each of us has an affinity to a different path and as we practise yoga, we draw on our strengths to balance ourselves, and hopefully attain a sharp mind, a loving heart, a strong body and a willingness to serve others.

Yoga is enfolded in mystical aspirations of the highest order, from perfect flexibility and compassion to universal enlightenment. Yet, as in the saying, “success is a journey, not a destination,” many of the rewards of yoga are actually in the practices themselves. The most valuable underlying attainment in yoga is also an ongoing process to investigate, integrate and accept our total humanness, which happens at every breath, in every moment. How does this seemingly magical process happen and how can we take advantage of it?

One of the most effective ways to apply ourselves is by first drawing on our strengths. From ancient times the yogis acknowledged the diversity of personalities and our affinities for one type of activity rather than another. There are as many yogic paths as there are students and dozens of yogic lineages offer specific practices. Yet these can be simplified into just three paths reflective of three human aspects – thinking, feeling and doing. The three corresponding paths of yoga are known as *jnana yoga*, the path of knowledge; *bhakti yoga*, the path of love; and *karma yoga*, the path of right action.

The path of knowledge

The wisdom path, or path of right understanding, is called *jnana yoga*, from the Sanskrit word *jna* meaning to know, to understand. Jnana yoga asks us to use the mind to investigate the state of humanness and the divinity within. This path embraces a wide range of philosophies and

practices and is often ascribed to teachers and individuals who have acquired learning and are seated in the experience of self-knowledge and unity with divine consciousness.

Traditionally the wisdom path of yoga has been ascribed to a philosophy known as Vedanta. Literally meaning ‘the end of the Vedas’, Vedanta draws on the scriptures of the Upanishads, which were composed between 800 and 400 BC. The Katha Upanishad (Part 3) says, “Strive for the highest, and be in the light! Sages say the path is narrow and difficult to tread, narrow as the edge of a razor.”

According to the *Upanishads* and Vedanta, beyond the senses and beyond the mind is the spirit, and beyond the individual spirit is the spirit of the universe. What the *jnani* – the one who follows the path of jnana yoga – looks for, or understands, is that the light of the individual spirit is a conduit or opening for the experience of universal light, or universal consciousness. The yogi of wisdom understands (1) there is a universal consciousness and (2) each individual is a manifestation of that consciousness and has the power to be firmly seated in that realisation.

One yogi who was instrumental in bringing Vedanta to the West was Swami Vivekananda, the most prominent disciple of the remarkable Indian sage Ramakrishna. In the 1890s Vivekananda travelled throughout America. He said, “You need

not even go out of yourself to know the truth. The present is all that is. There is only the One. All is here right now.”

Although students of jnana yoga generally are drawn to ideas and other processes of the mind, the great teachers of the wisdom traditions agree that true wisdom is attained only by experience. Through meditation, contemplation and divine communion, jnanis realise the light of the inner self and the understanding that each individual is interconnected with all of creation and the consciousness of the universe itself.

The path of love

The path of *bhakti yoga* is devotional. Followers of this path enjoy engaging in devotional activities, which expand the feeling in the heart and allow the devotee to connect to his or her experience of divine Consciousness. The *Vishistadvaita Vedantas* defines devotion as a “continuous stream of remembrance of God uninterrupted like the flow of oil from one vessel to another.”

Some *bhaktas* – followers of this path – create a personal relationship with divine consciousness, or God, by focusing on physical symbols or mental images. Traditional Indian bhaktas worship deities in the Hindu pantheon as symbols of different aspects of God. They enjoy performing rituals and ceremonies that honour the relationship between the individual and the divine, and symbolise the desire to offer love and devotion. By honouring the symbol as though it is an honoured guest – through offering foods, spices, flowers and fragrant scents – the devotee openly offers humility. As acts of reverence, rituals cut through ego to generate a sense of wellbeing. They also turn the heart inward and calm the mind by dissolving negative tendencies.

Another type of devotion is impersonal. Bhaktas honour the impersonal aspect of divine consciousness through meditation, constant remembrance of God and repetition of mantra, among other activities. By focusing on the expansive feeling of oneness or love, they feel connected with universal love.

Paramahansa Yogananda, author of the spiritual classic *Autobiography of a Yogi*, was a great bhakta. He said, “If we are attuned to God, our perception is limitless, pervading everywhere in the oceanic flow of the divine presence. When the spirit is known, and when we know

ourselves as spirit, there is no land or sea, no earth or sky – all is He. The melting of everything in spirit is a state no one can describe. A great bliss is felt – eternal fullness of joy and knowledge and love.”

The path of right action

Karma yoga, from the word *kri*, to make or to do, is the yoga of action. It is characterised by the idea that work performed in the spirit of service and the welfare of others leads to inner freedom.

We’re all familiar with the word *karma*. In general, it means that good actions bring us closer to the spiritual experience and bad actions take us further away. Good actions are offered for the benefit of others, without desire for reward. Bad actions are undertaken with personal motives, without consideration for others.

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Theoretically karma carries many meanings. As action it is the invisible force that shapes a person’s destiny. It adds to the person we are today and will be in the future. It yields good and bad results and it can directly affect positive or negative circumstances that we sometimes experience as being thrust upon us or beyond our control.

Swami Shankarananda, in his book, *Carrot in My Ear*, says, “Karma is so complex, yet underneath it all, karma is lawful in practice. Sometimes it is obscure, but as we get more and more in tune with the Self, we see karma unfolding and operating moment to moment. Think of yourself as free, and make intelligent choices. Choose good thoughts and good actions.”

The key to karma yoga is attitude. It is the practice of awareness and being responsible with intention and with action. Through karma yoga, every action is turned into a sacrifice, or let go without attachment. Theoretically when the ego is behind actions or inaction, they have a binding power. In practice, doing something with love is uplifting, while doing something with resistance or other negative feeling is bondage.

In our culture we are used to the cause and effect of doing work and getting paid, seemingly direct reward for action. A practice of karma yoga is to do work from morning to night as a dedication to the universe, then to be open to whatever comes in return – good or bad. Another practice of karma yoga is *seva*, or selfless service. Doing for others generates good feeling within and also gets something done, directly affecting the world in this moment.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, the first comprehensive work on the nature of yoga, was recorded about 500 BC. Verses 2: 47-48 say, “Set your heart upon your work, never on its reward. Do your work in the peace of yoga, and free from selfish desires, don’t be moved in success or in failure. Yoga is evenness of mind – a peace that is ever the same.”

Which kind of yogi are you?

One of the most amazing attributes of human experience is that everyone is different and a remarkable combination of many aspects. But it can also be revealing to identify personal patterns that help or hinder us in our inner and outer journeys in life.

Are you a wisdom-seeker?

The Path of Knowledge

Jnanis, or wisdom-seekers, are naturals for philosophical ideas, meditation, contemplation, self-inquiry, reading, studying, listening to lectures, observing, analysing, investigating, recording insights and understandings, speaking and being in the company of others dedicated to the spiritual path. Their challenges are to avoid judgement or unwavering opinion, to embrace rather than avoid expressing emotion, and to be open to the experience of the inner self rather than just reading about it. Pitfalls are being dry or spacey because of too much focus on the mind, and not developing enough empathy, or emotional consideration of others. Advantages are a strong mind and communication skills, which can help in meditation and teaching. Jnanis enjoy peace and clarity.

Are you a bhakta?

The Path of Love

Bhaktas love chanting, mantra repetition, rituals, offerings, prayer, big emotions, drama, and the stories of epics and great devotees in history. Their devotion to a guru or path of yoga is filled with love. Their challenges are to stay in the middle range of emotions rather than the high highs and low lows and to focus on the uplifting and positive rather than suffering. Pitfalls are being carried away by emotion of any type, not relating well with other people, or not getting enough done. Advantages are a loving heart, caring for others and unwavering one-pointedness on the inner self. *Bhaktas* enjoy the exquisite longing for the object of their devotion as well as the bliss of unwavering connection to the divine within.

Are you a karma yogi?

The Path of Right Action

Karma yogis prefer physical activities that include hatha yoga, discipline in yoga practice, being a yoga teacher, establishing routine, acts of kindness and service to others in any form. Loyal and reliable, *karma* yogis take pride in getting things

done, and are the most prominent ones in volunteer services. Their challenges are to plan before taking action and to involve others rather than going alone. Their pitfalls are getting discouraged too quickly or not following through. Advantages are a strong will, high energy, an ability to take action immediately, willingness to risk and not taking setbacks personally. *Karma* yogis enjoy the satisfaction of helping people and a job well done.

All paths lead inward to the self

These three paths are not mutually exclusive; in time, dedicated yogis usually develop into full-fledged *jnanis*, *bhaktas* and *karma* yogis. But, by following what first comes naturally, anyone who practices yoga can draw on strengths and investigate the other practices. For example, a *jnana yogi*, who normally prefers mind activities, might be able to expand love through listening to chants or volunteering services. A *bhakta* might want to settle into reading about spirituality or not getting involved in the rewards of actions. Likewise, a *karma* yogi might want to do what often is very hard for an active person – sit down and meditate, and explore the inner world.

Ultimately, all yogic paths offer a series of fascinating triumphs and tribulations that eventually lead to the same goal: to use the mind, the heart and the body to actualise the experience of being connected with the depths of the inner self and the expansiveness of universal consciousness.

For Further Reading:

Swami Shankarananda, *Carrot in My Ear*, Shaktipat Press, Mt Eliza, Victoria, 2004.

The Upanishads, translated by Juan Mascaro, Penguin Books, London, 1965.

The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1964.

Paramahansa Yogananda, *Where There Is Light*, Self-Realization Fellowship, Los Angeles, 1989.

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