

## Intro to the 4 Paths of Yoga

So how do we break the bonds of suffering in this life time? What is the best path for you? How do you know which path will lead you to happiness and peace? Sounds like the beginning to a contemporary self help book. And perhaps the *Bhagavad Gita* is something like that. As I wrote in the introduction to Yoga, the *Gita* is a part of the Vedanta, a story that goes deep into the metaphor of war to explain our roles in life, our responsibilities as seekers and offers ways into our own freedom and end of suffering through identification with the Self.

I deeply appreciate how the *Gita* gives us options; when identifying with God is too far removed from your daily life, we are offered the chance to pray and devote. If this path does not fit your needs of lifestyle we are offered the chance to work selflessly helping all who we meet, including ourselves, knowing that each moment we help another we connect with the Divine in them and that is a reflection of the Divine in us. When service is too hard we are given the chance to practice daily Yoga and its forms like pranayama, asana, concentration, sense withdrawal. Krishna in the *Gita* makes it clear that each path is an opportunity to be acquainted with the Greater Self within us each moment. And He understands the frail human mind and condition and so poses options for where we are in life.

Here is an example from the *Gita* of the consideration Krishna has for our wellbeing and liberation. Krishna here represents the Highest Consciousness and is explaining to Arjuna the various ways to know Him. Even without explicitly defining the paths here, these slokas directly refer to them.

“Therefore, just keep thinking about me. Fix your entire mind on me. Continuously direct your discerning intellect to consider who I am, and you will soon know that we are united forever; there is no doubt about it.

But if one doesn't yet have the ability to fix his mind on me and keep it there, Arjuna, then he should learn to do so through *Abhyasa Yoga* (regular yoga practice)

And if one has not yet developed the necessary self-discipline to practice yoga regularly, in fact he can also attain perfection just by conscientiously dedicating all his actions to me (Karma Yoga)

And if one cannot even do that, he may still take refuge in me by surrendering his ego. Thus, he abandons the expectation of any personal rewards as the result of his actions-and his mind becomes calm.” (*Gita* 12:8-11)

So you see, there is no need for self-judgment and shame. You start where you are and build your faith and practice from there. So let's get started!

## 4 Paths of Yoga

1. **Bhakti Yoga: Path of Devotion** Love! Devotional worship of God in any form (both God and devotion can take any form here.) Offerings, ceremonies, prayer and contemplation practices, morning chants, etc. Ayurvedically speaking, Bhakti Yoga is one of the most powerful paths we can walk upon. Love is more healing than herbs and faith can move our sickness from the body. Let's for a moment imagine we have forgotten we too are a part of God and so one way to remember is to constantly put our minds and hearts on God. As no one form can complete the image or Reality of God, we can be happy worshipping any form, knowing we are offering our Love and gratitude.
2. **Jhana Yoga: Path of Knowledge** The intellectual approach to understanding that we are the Self we are seeking. This path uses questions like, "Who am I? Who just asked that question? Where does this question come from and why am I curious?" Here we sharpen the analytic skills of the intellect to discern between our ego's vision of the world and the Truth behind the seeing. Here we learn about who is seeing, what is seen and the process of seeing itself.
3. **Karma Yoga: Path of Selfless-Service** Offering all our actions and their results back to God. This path offers us the way to God through renunciation. Here we do not need to be monks and nuns to give up the worldly life to know God; we simply act knowing we are not the doers, so we do not keep the result of our actions. Maybe this concept is more than the simple mind can understand and so we begin by simply helping other people. At first maybe we see them as separate from us and our "values" lead us to volunteer. If we are doing our Jhana Yoga practice we begin to see all things as coming from the same place and so our Karma Yoga practice begins to open us up to the possibility that we are also helping those hidden parts in ourselves as we offer service to those around us. And further investigation might prove that when offering something without any reward in mind the action itself raises our consciousness and becomes sacred. The idea of karma is that all actions have energy that creates consequences either positive or negative. When an action is done for God, the energy of karma ceases and no consequence exists (this is karma yoga). (We will go over the concept of Karma later in the year)
4. **Raja Yoga: Royal Path of Integration** This is the path of meditation and contemplation. On this path we encounter Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* and its 8 limbed Path and Kriya Yoga, which includes all practices of Hatha Yoga. Raja Yoga is called the royal path of the Mind as the basis of this path understands the workings of the mind and the methods for its control and stillness. Raja Yoga seeks for us to have a solid and constant practice in order to experience our true nature, that of Wisdom, Bliss, Joy and Peace. Raja Yoga includes all other paths in its practice. Bhakti, Jhana and Karma Yoga can be seen coming from Raja Yoga, where the mind is still and the Heart of Wisdom speaks. Here *Samadhi* is the ultimate "goal" of our practice. *Samadhi* is the experience of our union with the Greater Self. Meditation is the prolonged awareness of our selves in union with an object and from this point *Samadhi* is reached.