

Student Textbook (Section A)

Year 7, Term 5: 'Four Types of Yoga'

Learning Intentions:

In this Unit, we aim to:

1. Understand the four paths (yogas) by exploring both the Bhagavad-gita and our personal experience.
2. Understand the aims, results and practices linked to each yoga.
3. Know and critically understand the meaning of practices within bhakti yoga (especially worship and mantra meditation)
4. Analyse and identify how yoga, especially bhakti, is a part of all world regions
5. Explore similarities and differences between the four yogas, and evaluate what Krishna suggests is the best or highest path.

Structure of the Unit

There are six weeks, each focussing on:

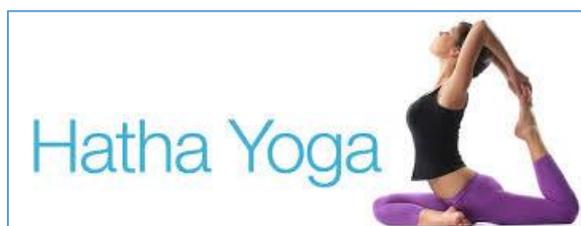
1. The Four Paths (1): Action and Knowledge
2. The Four Paths (2): Meditation and Devotion
3. Bhakti-yoga; worship
4. Bhakti yoga: mantra, japa and kirtan
5. Love in the World Religions
6. Evaluating the Four Yogas

Unit 7.5 (Year 7, Summer Term 1)

Week 1: The Four Paths (1): Action and Knowledge

1: Four Types of Yoga

Most people think yoga is about adopting physical postures or doing meditation. However, they may not know that there are many types of yoga. Some books claim there are three main forms; others say there are four types. There are more, but the main four are discussed in detail in the Bhagavad-gita.



When most people hear the word **yoga**, they think of physical exercises (practiced in one kind of yoga).

Do You Know?

The four main types of yoga are:

1. **Karma-yoga**: the yoga of action
2. **Jnana-yoga**: the yoga of knowledge
3. **Astanga-yoga**: the yoga of meditation
4. **Bhakti yoga**: the yoga of devotion

Notes:

- (a) sometimes three are listed, without number 3
- (b) astanga-yoga is also called 'raja-yoga'
- (c) What is commonly known as 'yoga' (with physical exercises) is actually hatha-yoga, which is part of astanga-yoga.

Yoga in the Bhagavad-gita

The Bhagavad-gita is divided into 3 parts, each of 6 chapters, as shown below:

- Part 1 - chapters 1 to 6
- Part 2 - chapters 7 to 12
- Part 3 - chapters 13 to 18

The following is a summary of the first six chapters according to the bhakti tradition: "The first six chapters describe the self as an eternal, spiritual being capable of self-realisation through various types of yoga, the highest of which is bhakti-yoga."

However, not all Hindus agree that Bhakti is the highest. Some think another yoga (e.g. jnana-yoga) to be the best. Others think that all yogas are equal, and that you can choose any according to your preference.

What does yoga mean?

The term yoga means 'union', and refers to the relationship between the individual self (*atman*) and the Supreme Self (God). From this Sanskrit word, we get the English word 'yoke', which (when used as a verb) means 'to join'. The four 'yogas' are also called the four margas. Marga means 'path'.

Word Watch

Yoga - 'union' or 'union with the Supreme'
Marga - a Sanskrit word for 'path'; in Hindi, it is spelled as 'marg'.
Karma - action
Jnana - knowledge
Astanga - eight parts
Raja - 'king'
Bhakti - devotion (or devotional service)
Communion - a Christian word with a similar meaning to 'yoga' for those who believe in a personal God.

Over the next two weeks we'll explore these four paths. They all have a common goal of 'union with God'. However, there are other, lesser goals for some practitioners. So, each yoga may give particular results. And, within Hinduism, almost all spiritual or religious practices are linked to one of the four paths.

There is one important question we'll be asking in this unit:

Are all the four yogas equal? Is one yoga better than the others; or higher perhaps? If so, why?

Before that, it's important to know that Hindus think that the four paths are relevant to all people (even if they aren't Hindus). This is because all humans have some interest in these four areas: activity, knowledge, meditation and love. Yoga means that these interests are best linked to God.

Exercise 1

Consider the four activities below and decide which (if any) is your favourite. Perhaps put them in order, starting with number 1 (your favourite) and finishing with number 4 (your least favourite)

- 1. Action:** Being busy; working hard to achieve something.
- 2. Knowledge;** reading, studying, learning, researching thinking
- 3. Meditation;** doing yoga exercises; being still; concentrating and meditating; mindfulness
- 4. Devotion:** showing love for others; serving or caring for others

2: Karma Yoga

Karma-yoga places stress of action, work and ritual. It was popular during the 'Vedic period' when the Vedas were written down and many followers wanted to go to the higher or heavenly worlds. It is favoured in the karma-section of the Vedas, and practices include the 'havan' (sacred fire sacrifice).



South Indian priests perform the sacred fire ceremony associated with the 'karma-kanda' section of the Vedas

In the early stages, karma-yogis tend toward accepting the world, and enjoying it in a moral way (usually within family life). It is sometimes called 'the path of selfless action'. Hindus who work hard and give in charity to religious causes often call themselves 'karma-yogis'. However, the perfect karma yogi works very hard without any desire to personally enjoy the 'fruits' (i.e. results). Karma-yoga is also closely connected to the concept of dharma (duty).

Sastra Says

The steadily devoted soul attains complete peace because he offers the result of all activities to Me. However, a person who is not in union with the Divine, who is greedy to enjoy the results of his work, becomes entangled.

Bhagavad-Gita Chapter 5, verse 12

3: Jnana Yoga

Whereas karma yogis often still want to enjoy the world, the jnana-marga rejects it as illusion (*maya*). Maya means 'that which is not'. So, Illusion is accepting something unreal to be real, like an optical illusion, or a mirage (e.g. seeing an oasis in the desert).



On a hot day, we think we see water on the road, even though it is dry. This is a 'mirage'. The water we think we see does not actually exist!

According to Hindu thought, maya (illusion) starts when we accept the temporary body as the real self; or, we accept the mind as the real self. The great teacher Shankara gave the example of mistaking a rope for a snake in the dark (and getting scared for no good reason!). Jnana-yoga aims to overcome such wrong ideas through the path of philosophy and wisdom. In this way, one can understand the real, eternal self (atman) and become free from all fear.



This painting attempts to show how the same person changes his or her body, even in this one life.

However, jnana is more than theory. It requires practitioners to follow strict rules to control the mind and senses. Some say only a sannyasin (celibate monk) can succeed – married people are often too caught up in making money and looking after the family. Family people tend to think that temporary pleasures and possessions will bring lasting happiness. However, such attachment to material life can bring much unhappiness.



This t-shirt slogan hints that some people become cynical about life and love. They may wish to give up the world, thinking that 'all life is suffering'.

We heard how karma-yogis often try to attain heaven (i.e. the higher planets in this world). Jnana yogis, however, usually aspire for *moksha*, liberation (i.e. release from the continuous cycle of birth and death. They think that with liberation the self (atman) merges with the Supreme Self. They mostly believe in a non-personal God (Brahman).

Week 1: The Four Paths (2): Meditation and Devotion

1: Astanga Yoga

Astanga-yoga is sometimes called raja-yoga, suggesting it is the best way to link to the divine (literally, it is 'the king of yogas'). It is like jnana yoga because it also rejects the world as false. Astanga-yogis try to become detached from the external body and all that goes with it (family, possessions and so on). Sometimes, these yogis want magical powers. Many live by themselves or together, but away from society. They can be seen at the famous Kumbha Mela (bathing fair).

Astanga yoga is often connected to a branch of Hinduism called *tantra*. Such people often worship Lord Shiva, which is called Maha-yogi.



Lord Shiva is considered the best of all yogis. Here he sits meditating in the Himalayas.

Although most popular yoga is based on astanga yoga, its real aim is more than losing weight, good health or a calm mind. It aims to connect with God, especially his form within (in the heart). It is based on specific texts, called the yoga-sutras, written by Patanjali.



Yogis at the Kumbha Mela

Meditational yoga in the modern world

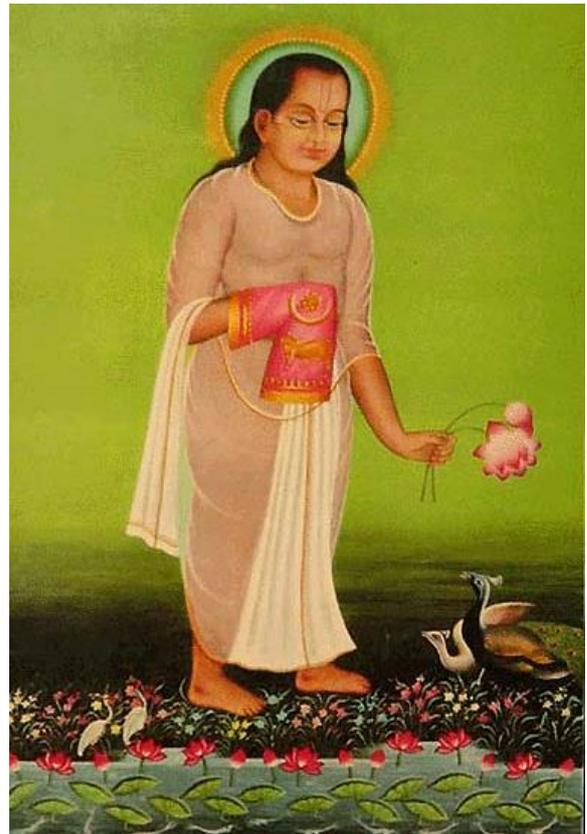
Meditational yoga is seen today through three main communities:

1. The ancient ascetic traditions, whose members are seen at the Kumbha Mela (see above)
2. Popular yoga groups, such as Transcendental Meditation and the Sivananda Yoga Centre. Such organisations often appeal to non-Hindus.
3. Devotional traditions which have absorbed much meditational practice, such as the chanting of mantras on beads or in musical worships, such as *kirtan*.

This shows that the yogas are often closely connected



Even though bhakti is different from astanga, it includes many meditational practices. Kirtan chanting is a way of concentrating the mind on God.



The bhakti (devotional) saint, Vallabha, chants on his beads (within his L-shaped 'bead-bag')

2: Bhakti-yoga

Some consider the process of bhakti yoga to be less-advanced, suitable for simple-minded or sentimental people. However many bhakti-yogis consider it the highest path, which needs not only devotion, but also deep philosophical understanding. However, they teach that without a good heart there can be no clear understanding, nor moral behaviour; nor is steady meditation possible using only a mechanical process - it becomes easy and natural only when there is love.

Karma-yogis are often inclined to enjoy the world; philosophers and meditators tend to renounce it. The bhaktas (devotees) believe in neither but it *yukta-vairagya*; using everything in God's service. They do not aspire for heaven or liberation but for love of God (i.e. to enter into their eternal relationship with God).

Sastra Says

If one offers Me with love and devotion a leaf, a flower, fruit or water, I will accept it.

Bhagavad-gita 9.26

3: Are all paths the same?

Some Hindu teachers have taught that all parts lead to the same goal. However, others recommend one path as being superior to others (even though these lesser paths are useful for beginners on the longer journey). Some teachers talk of a 'yoga ladder', in which one yoga is on top of the ladder; however, all the rungs are important in reaching human perfection.

For example, some jnanis claim that bhakti is useful for sentimental people, whereas jnana is only possible for those who are highly intelligent (and free of family responsibilities). However, for many bhaktas, knowledge is only a middle stage leading to the higher path of devotion.

Sastra Says

A yogi is greater than the ascetic, greater than the empiricist philosopher and greater than the fruitive worker. Therefore, O Arjuna, in all circumstances, be a yogi.

Bhagavad-gita 6.46

Exercises

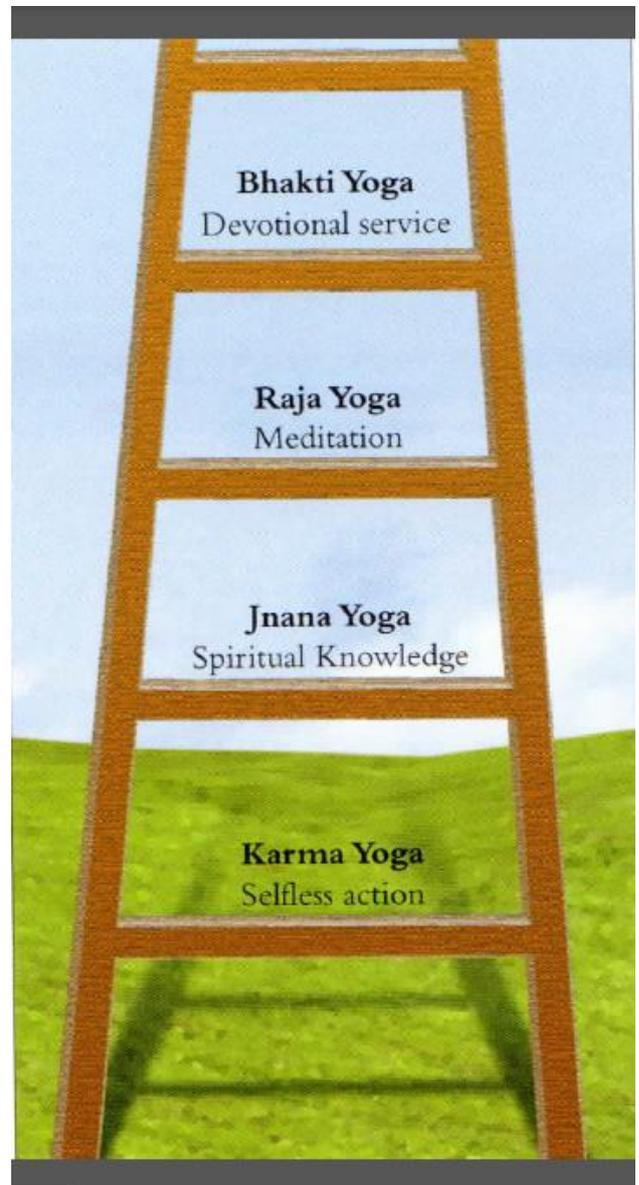
1. Consider some of the faith traditions other than Hinduism. Do they seem to have elements of karma, jñāna, mediation and devotion?
2. What do you think is the best of the four path, if any?
3. Which do you prefer and why?

Analogy Alert!

The Hill and the Ladder

According to Vaishnava thought, the various yogas are closely related, but some are lower and others are higher. They give the example of a ladder, which has various rungs all leading towards the top. Some traditions suggest that jnana yoga is the highest.

Other Hindu teachers give the example of paths up a hill or mountain. The paths are different but they lead to the same goal (the top of the mountain). For this reason it doesn't matter which path you choose – they are all equally good.



This illustration of the 'yoga ladder' suggests that all yogas are good but that Bhakti is the highest.