

The word **yoga** itself means 'union': of the individual consciousness or soul with the Universal Consciousness or Spirit. There are various paths of Yoga (nearly forty) that lead toward this goal, each one a specialized branch of one comprehensive system. These schools are generally considered principal:

Hatha Yoga: a system of physical postures, or asanas, whose higher purpose is to purify the body, giving one awareness and control over its internal states and rendering it fit for meditation.

Karma Yoga: selfless service to others as part of ones larger self, without attachment to the results; and the performance of all actions with the consciousness of God as the Doer.

Mantra Yoga: centering the consciousness within through japa, or the repetition of certain universal root-word sounds representing a particular aspect of Spirit.

Bhakti Yoga: all surrendering devotion through which one strives to see and love the divinity in every creature and in everything, thus maintaining an unceasing worship.

Jnana Yoga: the path of wisdom, which emphasizes the application of discriminative intelligence to achieve spiritual liberation.

Raja Yoga: the royal or highest path of Yoga, formally systematized in the second century B.C. by the Indian sage Patanjali, which combines the essence of all the other paths.

The different paths

The various paths of yoga lead to the same point or source. They are often compared to different rivers which flow into the sea. At first they are completely separate and are known by different names. However, as the rivers progress, they begin to merge with each other until eventually they are totally absorbed in the ocean. The rivers completely lose their individuality. It is the same with the various yogic paths. At first they have specific characteristics and sometimes even seem to contradict each other, but as one progresses along any one or number of these paths, their separateness disappears. All the paths of yoga incorporate the same aim: physical health, mental peace and higher awareness. The many variations of yoga can be broadly classified into five basic groups. These cater for the most prominent aspects of our personality:

- Karma yoga: the path of activity
- Bhakti yoga: the path of devotion
- Jnana yoga: the path of enquiry
- Raja yoga: the path of introspection
- Hatha yoga: the path of balancing the mental, physical and subtle (pranic or bioplasmic) forces of the body.

Any other forms of yoga can be placed under these five headings.

All of us have a tendency to be introspective and to enquire about the nature of life and other topics that vitally influence us. Simultaneously, everyone has emotional tendencies by nature and are continually performing actions in one form or another. Lastly everyone has a mind and physical body as well as a bioplasmic body, though few of us realize the latter aspect of our being. It is the way that these aspects of our consciousness relate to to each other that determines our personality. In other words, some of us are more emotional or devotional than others. For these people the path of bhakti yoga is recommended.

Other people can never keep still; they must always be acting and expressing themselves in the outside world. Karma yoga is the main path for these people. Others are much quieter and more introspective in nature; they tend to watch their mental reactions to life's

situations. Here the way of raja yoga is recommended. Still others have a strong tendency to enquire about the nature of life; in a sense they are stubborn for they refuse to accept any answer unless it is based on personal experience. They should practice jnana yoga. Then there are those who, perhaps being a bit more down to earth, can relate to tuning up the forces of their mind and body (physical and subtle) to the best possible condition. In other words, to attain health and calmness of mind. These people should practice hatha yoga.

Actually it is best to practice all the five main paths of yoga to a certain extent, with an emphasis on the path that is keeping with the predominant aspect of your personality. It is this path that should be followed with the most zeal, for it will be in accordance with your personality. Swami Sivananda was a firm believer in what he called 'integral yoga', in which all aspects of the personality are channeled through performing a combination of these different paths. He said that one should "Serve-Love-Meditate-Realize". This encompasses the five different aspects of being: action, devotion, introspection, enquiry and body (the latter being included with meditation). Let us discuss these five categories of yoga in turn.

Hatha yoga

We will deal with this path first because it generally precedes the other forms. In other words, to tread any path of yoga, physical, psychic and mental health is essential and these are the basic aims of hatha yoga. In fact, it is often regarded as the first part of raja yoga for without without the preliminary practice of hatha yoga, raja yoga becomes very difficult, if not impossible.

The hindi word hatha means 'obstinate'. But the meaning of hatha yoga is not obstinate yoga, though some people might regard it as being so. The word hatha is composed of two syllables, namely ha and tha. Ha means the sun and the means the moon. Yoga means communion. Thus hatha yoga means the harmony between the sun and moon aspects of our being. The right nostril is connected with the sun aspect; the left nostril is connected with the moon aspect. The moon rules over the mental functions, while the sun controls the vital and physical functions. This applies to everyone and is a basic tenet of yoga. The two nostrils have a deeper association with the flow of prana within our being. It is this flow of prana that ultimately influences the mental and physical functions. If the moon flow is predominant, then one tends to think too much. If the sun flow is predominant there is a tendency towards extroversion and physical activity. Throughout the day we tend to operate either more mentally or more physically. This is a natural process. However, for perfect mental and physical balance the sun flow should predominate for a total of about twelve hours and the moon flow for the other twelve in each day. This ensures a balanced personality-neither too much introversion nor too much extroversion. The balance of these two is essential and the basic aim of hatha yoga.

Not only this, but balance leads to perfect physical and mental health. Further, it is the period when the flow in both nadis is exactly the same (manifested by equal flow in both nostrils) that spontaneous states of meditation can arise.

In the ancient classical text, the Gherand Samhita, hatha yoga is referred to as 'ghastatha yoga'. Ghata means a 'pot' or a 'vessel', representing the physical body, meaning the yoga of that which is contained within the physical body. The text continues: "the physical body is like an unbaked pitcher which dissolves itself if filled with water. In the same way the body becomes strong when it is fired or hardened by the fire of yoga (hatha or ghashata)." (1:18) This is a perfect description of the basic aim and philosophy of hatha yoga. We have already introduced you to some of the basic practices of hatha yoga, which can be roughly divided into different groups as follows:

Shatkarmas are in the main concerned with cleansing the body. Many diseases are caused by the build-up of toxins within the body. These practices are the first step in eliminating these waste products, and thereby regaining perfect health.

Asanas are the physical postures of yoga. We have already introduced you to many of them,

their rules and a few practices, so we will not go into any detail here. We will mention however, that there is much controversy between the different schools of yoga as to whether asanas are actually part of hatha yoga, raja yoga, tantra yoga or of all three.

Mudras and bandhas are often classified with hatha yoga. Mudras are special physical positions of the body or parts of the body which induce deeper physiological, psychic and mental changes in one's being. Bandhas are physical locks which perform the same function.

Health is the fundamental aim of hatha yoga. What is health? It is difficult to define. Some people think that good health is epitomized by rippling muscles, but this is not necessarily true, for many fitness fanatics suffer from chronic physical problems. Are easily susceptible to infection and disease and are also weighed down with many mental problems. Often skinny looking people are far healthier than the Tarzan types. In a general sense, health can be defined as a combination of the following: resistance to infection, absence of disease, both mental and physical endurance, flexibility of mind and body, mental peace, perfect coordination and condition of all organs, muscles and nerves in the body and their control by the brain and spinal nerve centers, together with a perfectly functioning pranic body. Hatha yoga aims to bring about this state of health.

Hatha yoga is particularly popular with many people, for they can see tangible benefits from its practice. It is very easy to see improvement in physical health and to feel emotionally and mentally more calm than usual, and hatha yoga leads to these benefits in a reasonably short period of regular practice. However, at the same time it is important to understand or at least appreciate that health of the body and mind is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is a method to master the mind and attain higher states of consciousness. To this end hatha yoga and other paths of yoga can be utilized. The basic aim of hatha yoga is to build a firm, strong, healthy body, because without this asset, one's activities and aspirations are severely curtailed. Hatha yoga also ensures that there is free flow of prana within the psychic channels of the body. This is of prime importance for perfect physical and mental health as well as experiencing higher states of awareness.

Remember that although prana is not visible it does not mean that it is non-existent or a mere concept. For the sake of comprehension, equate prana with electricity. Electricity cannot be seen and scientists have never explained its nature, yet at the same time it is agreed that some form of energy exists which we label electricity, and can be seen when we flick a switch and electrical gadgets work. Without the electrical supply there is no reaction. Similarly without prana our body would cease to function.

Hatha yoga aims at harmonizing prana in the body so that in turn the physical body will automatically become healthy and receptive to higher vibrations. The mind and prana are intimately linked together and so if the pranic body is tuned up, then the mind is automatically relaxed and harmonized; at least to a degree, for it is the mind that controls prana, not prana the mind. However, prana and mind are part and parcel of the same thing; the division between them is only arbitrary. Certainly we can say that a balanced pranic body implies vitality of both body and mind, for all these aspects are directly related to each other.

Hatha yoga treats the body as an instrument to be kept in the best possible condition. This is one of the reasons most other spiritual and religious systems fall down. They seem to ignore this important aspect of our being. If a musician wants to play a beautiful musical composition, it is essential that his instrument is in perfect condition. He would not dream of playing his masterpiece on a broken, battered violin. It is the same with the path to higher awareness. The essential prerequisite is a well tuned body and mind.

Karma yoga

This is the yoga of action, the system of attaining awareness through activity. It is performance of our daily work with constant awareness and at the same time without any expectation of reward. It is this living in the present which enables far more effective,

efficient and powerful actions. By totally absorbing the self in the work at hand we tend to reduce the power of the ego. This is the essence of karma yoga, and results in less emotional and mental upsets in life. It helps to make the mind more calm and peaceful under any circumstances and more receptive to the practices of yoga. This in itself can lead to meditation.

Bhakti yoga

This is the yoga of devotion. It is the channeling of emotions into devotion., directed towards a guru, deity or suitable object. In this way the emotions are given an outlet, instead of suppressing them or dissipating them in different directions. The bhakta absorbs himself completely in his object of devotion, losing his individuality or ego. Emotional and mental problems disappear, concentration increases and the path to higher awareness and self-realization is opened.

Jnana yoga

This is the path of enquiry. It is not, as so many people say, the path of the intellect. It attempts to transcend the limitations of the intellect or logical faculties of each individual, so how can it possibly be the path of the intellect? Higher awareness can never arise through rational thinking. Jnana yoga is the path towards illuminative knowledge, and this is allogical- neither logical nor illogical. It transcends them both. In this path one enquires about the essence of existence and one's true nature. Effort, concentration and total absorption in the enquiry are prerequisites for success in this path. Without these attributes, illumination will not take place. By illumination we do not mean stereotyped answers, but intuitive answers which cannot be spoken about. If one can talk about illumination it usually has not occurred. This is the reason why so many great yogis has refused to talk about their highest experiences. They know it is impossible.

Raja Yoga

This is the path of introspection. It encompasses many other separate paths of yoga which we will briefly mention. It is the part in which one attempts to explore the different realms of the mind: conscious, subconscious, unconscious and beyond. The purpose is to become increasingly aware of these different aspects of being. Raja yoga progressively attempts to transcend the outer environment of the physical body, and direct the awareness to the inner environment. Each person has consciousness; either it can be directed outwards or it can be directed inwards. Either we can be conscious of the external surroundings or we can be conscious of the inner world. Usually our attention is on outer objects. If perception of the external is cut off, as is attempted in raja yoga, then the consciousness must be directed inwards. It has to go somewhere. When it goes inwards it starts to light up our inner existence and we begin to explore ourselves. We normally see only the surface of the ocean of the mind; we don't see what is below. If we dive into the depths towards the seabed we would see the deeper aspects of the mind that are normally hidden from us. This is the aim of raja yoga in its many forms. We will briefly mention some of the main types:

Patanjali Yoga

Patanjali yoga is often identified with raja yoga directly, for they are regarded as synonymous. However, for the sake of argument we will consider raja yoga as being the group name of all the different paths that are introspective in nature. The system of patanjali yoga consist of eight steps or limbs which the aspirant must progressively master on the path to self-realization.

1. Yamas (self-restraints)
2. Niyamas (self-observances)
3. Asanas

4. Pranayama (regulation of prana through breath control)
5. Prathyahara (disassociation of consciousness with the outside environment)
6. Dharana (concentration)
7. Dhyana (meditation)
8. Samadhi (identification with pure consciousness)

Kundalini yoga

This is a system of yoga concerned with the awakening of the pranic or psychic centers known as chakras, which exist within all of us. These chakras are centers of bioplasmic energy and are directly related to different levels of awareness. In the body there are numerous chakras, but kundalini yoga concerns itself with six main ones which are located throughout the length of the spine. Kundalini yoga aims to awaken these chakras and thereby induce higher states of consciousness. In a sense it puts 'the cart before the horse'; in other words as one attains higher states of awareness, perhaps by practicing other forms of yoga, then the associated chakra will automatically open. Kundalini yoga tackles this from the opposite direction. It tries to first open the chakras to induce the associated levels of awareness. This force or power that one attains in the form of higher awareness is symbolized by the kundalini, a serpent that is said to reside in the lower regions of the pelvis. This form of yoga is also known as laya yoga.

Mantra yoga

Mantra yoga is the yoga of sound. Most people are very sadly ignorant of the power of sound, yet the ancient sages through personal experience realized that sound has incredible power to influence the mind and body as well as produce changes in the material world. The ancient yogis experimented with different combinations of sound and found that they could induce extraordinary changes within the mind – different sounds producing different effects. They called these special sounds mantras and they were handed down from generation to generation.

Mantra yoga utilizes the power of sound as a method of inducing introspection and subtle mental changes, and to evoke mental and psychic manifestations. A particular mantra is usually repeated over and over again either verbally or mentally, producing mental tranquility, concentration and awareness of the inner process of the mind. It is a powerful method of allowing meditational states to flower. Mantra yoga is also known as japa yoga, though generally japa is a more confined term.

Dhyana Yoga

Dhyana yoga is most often classified as a separate path of yoga. However, the word dhyana means meditation. So in a sense this type of yoga can refer to the aims and higher stages of all forms of yoga.

Kriya yoga

This is the yogic path of movement and awareness. It is a powerful system and is the subject matter of the third part of this book. The aim is to bring about awareness of the processes of the inner environment of man.