

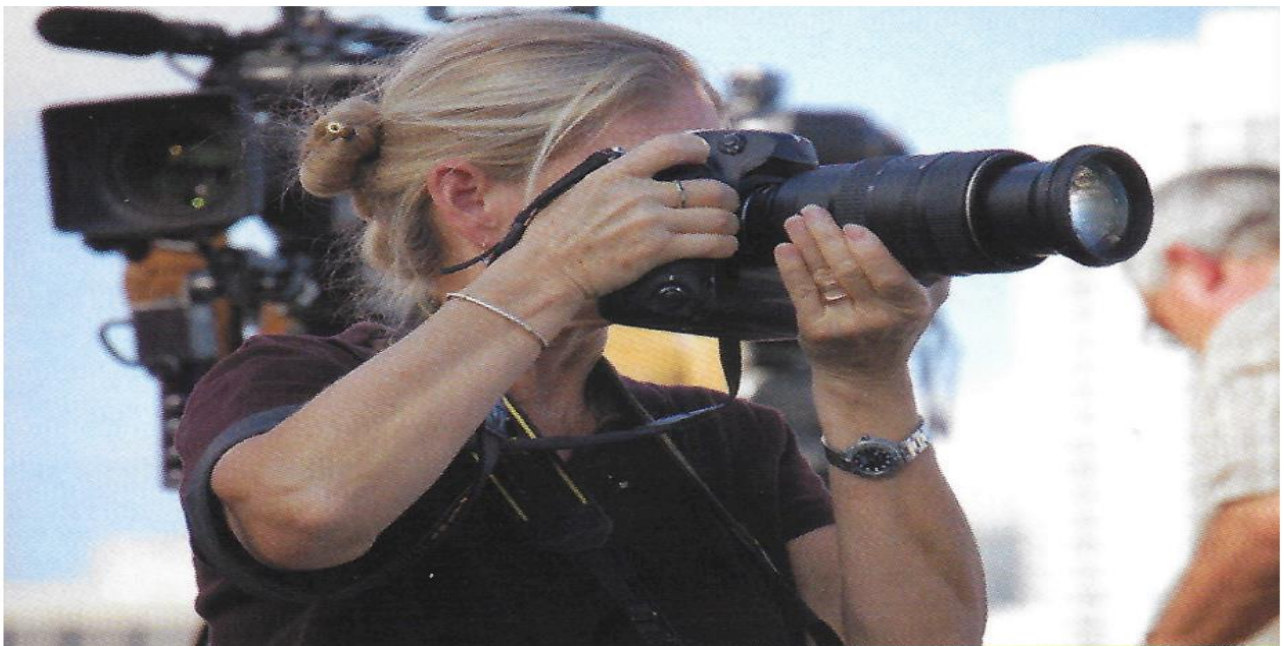
The Yoga Ladder

Yoga is hot! At last report, more and more people are practicing yoga, and the numbers are growing. Every fitness and work out center, it seems, offers yoga classes. In our overstressed over-anxious, overworked lives, yoga relieves anxiety, fatigue, depression, and our overall poor health. Our focus in the West has been largely limited to asana (postures) and pranayama (breathing exercises). What we're missing, though, is yoga's spiritual dimension.

A lot of people think that spiritual awareness is some sort of passive state in which one withdraws from the world. Today's entangled seekers often feel that to live a truly spiritual life they have to renounce the world or seclude themselves in nature, a monastery, or an ashram. But the Bhagavad-Gita teaches there are a variety of yoga paths, and each lead to a level of perfection the way steps on a ladder lead from bottom to top. For example, asana and pranayama are important aspects of meditational yoga, but meditational yoga is only one of the steps on the yoga ladder.

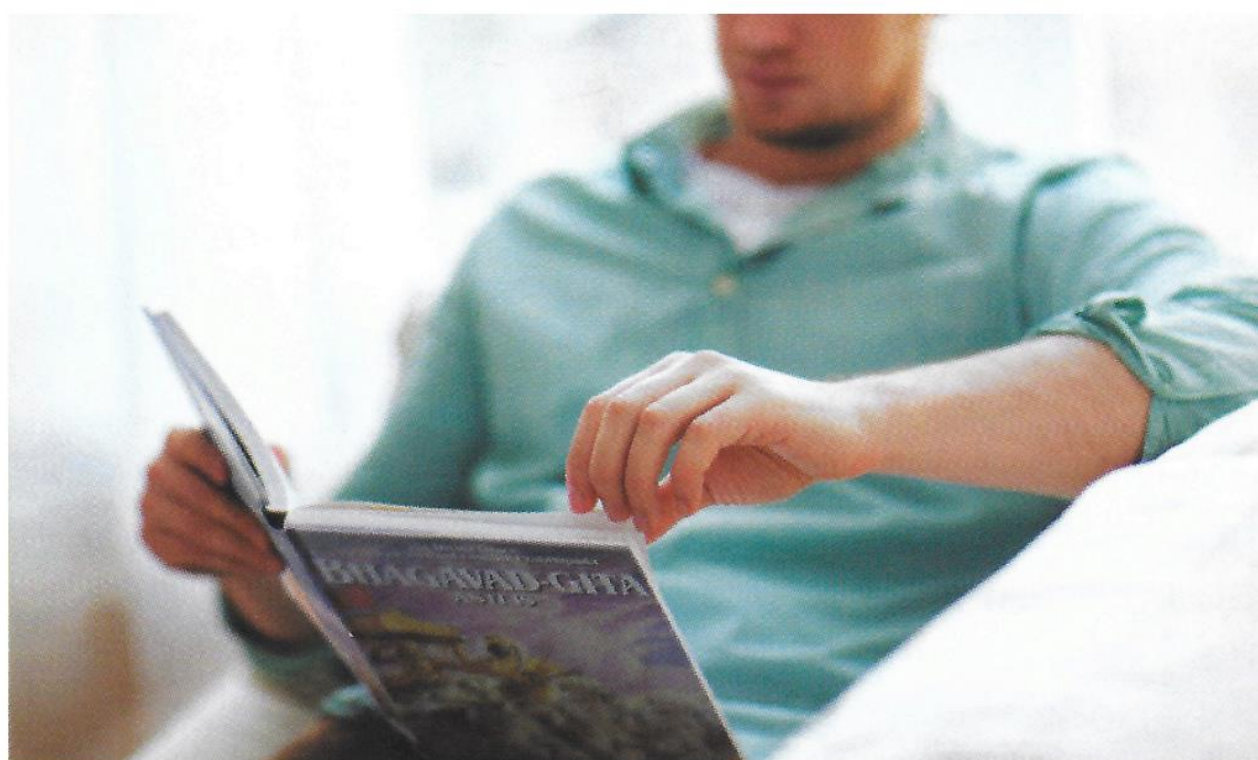
The Bhagavad-gita ranks these yoga paths in this order:

1. **Karma-yoga**, the yoga of **action**



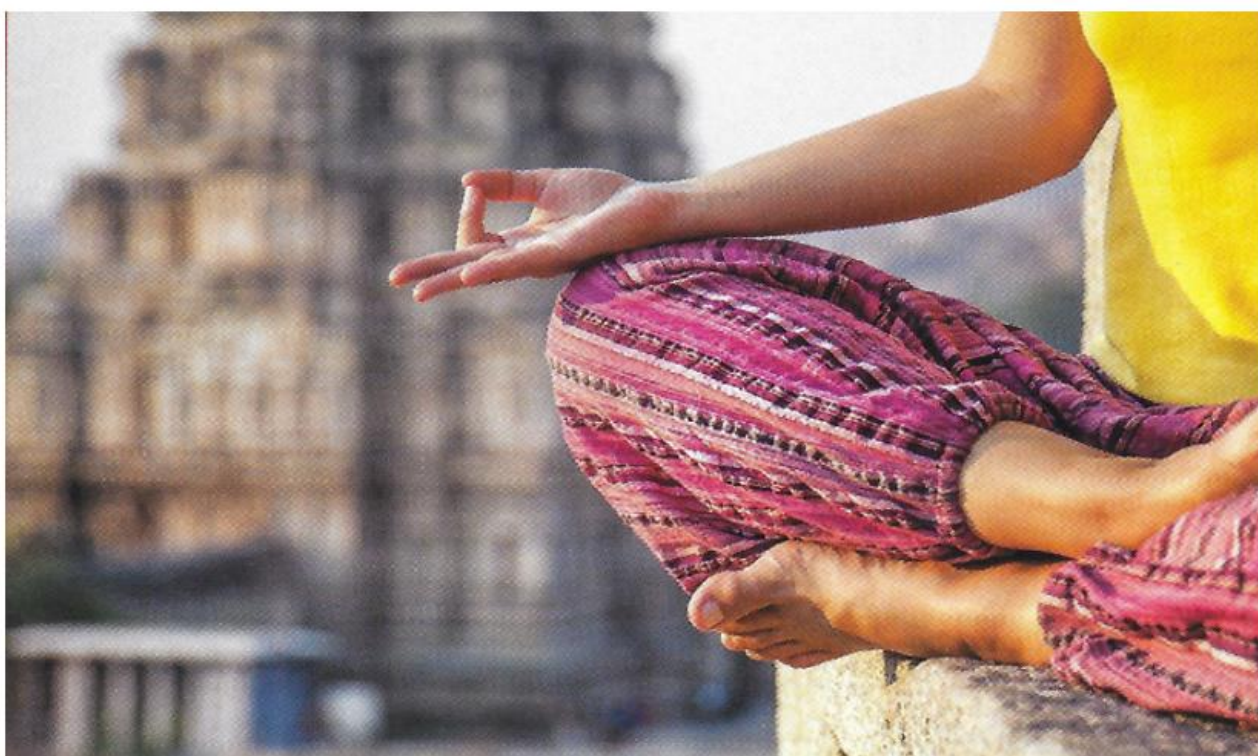
Action yoga: By dedicating our works to the Divine Source we become liberated from the bonds of material karma

2. Jnana-yoga, the yoga of **knowledge**



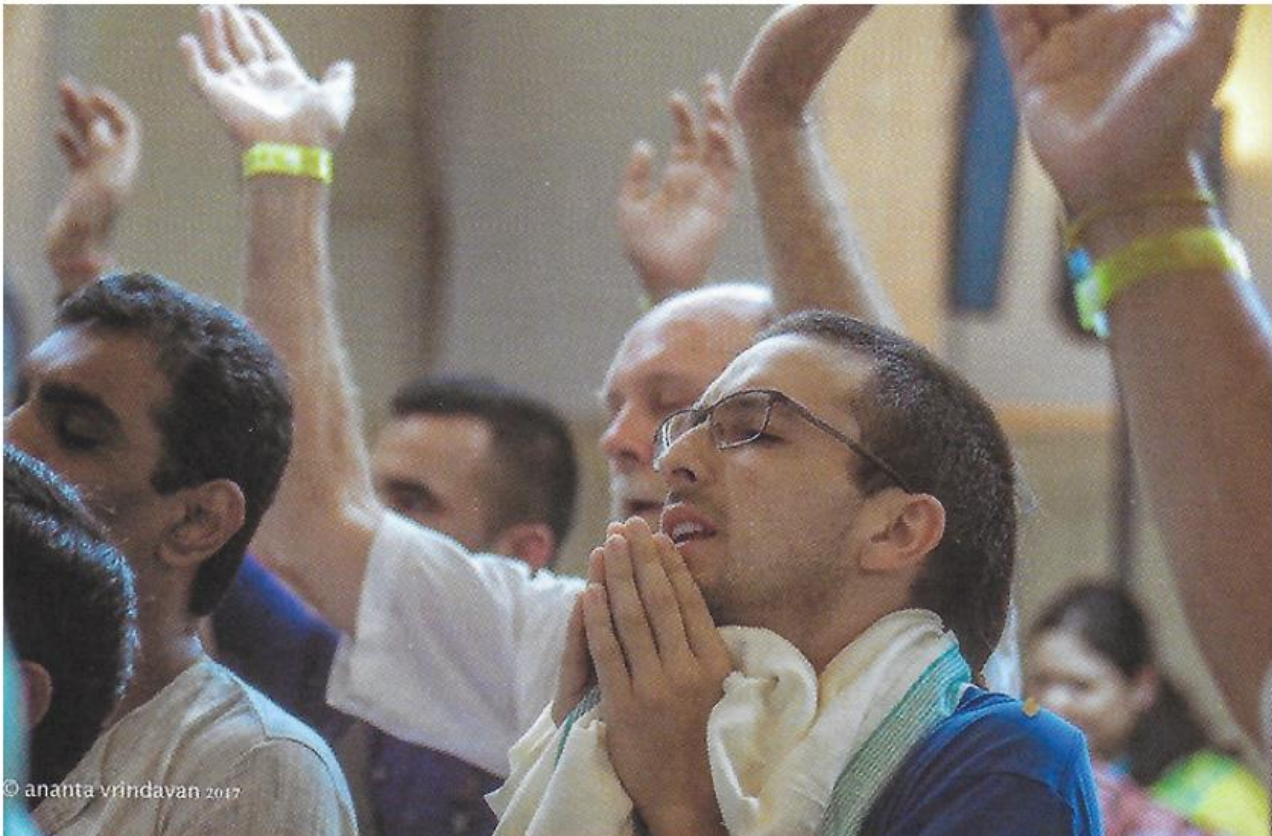
Knowledge yoga: by study of yoga literature one gains understanding of the Divine Source

3. Dhyana-yoga, the yoga of **meditation**



Meditation yoga: by meditation one achieves the awareness of the Divine Source within the heart and mind

4. **Bhakti-yoga**, the yoga of **devotion**.



Devotion yoga: by devotional practices one develops love for the Divine Source

Action yoga teaches that no one can refrain from action. We seek pleasure and avoid pain. We act to acquire the things we want-love, wealth, security, power, fame, bodily pleasure, and so on. To advance in the yoga of action, though, we have to give up the results of our actions, because by clinging to those fruits, we become bound to the karmic cycle of birth and death. Acting selfishly leaves us disconnected from the Divine Source, the source of our being. Practicing karma yoga by offering the fruits of our activities to that Divine Source renews that connection. This doesn't mean to blindly give away our possessions or to neglect those who depend on us in the name of giving everything away; rather, it means using our assets in a spirit of devotion to help others.

The next path, jnana-yoga, or the yoga of knowledge, develops from action yoga. Actually, taking action leads to knowledge, and knowledge leads to spiritual action, so these two paths combine to help us overcome karmic bondage.

Knowledge is defined as understanding three fundamental realities:

1. The nature of the material body and the material (natural) world,
2. The nature of the soul, who knows the body,
3. The nature of the divine spirit, who knows all bodies.

The Gita says that this knowledge sets us free and is the “ultimate purifier”. It’s like “fire” that burns up our karma. Just as we have to spiritualize our actions in this world so that they become action yoga, so our pursuit of knowledge must be transformed into knowledge yoga. Similarly, meditation must become meditational yoga if we want its best results.

Beginning with asanas and pranayama to control the body and calm the mind, the following practices of meditational yoga are used to reach the higher goals of yoga:

Pratyahara - withdrawing the senses from the sense objects - looking inward.

Dharana - focusing the mind.

Dhyana - meditation.

Samadhi - ultimate bliss in relationship with the Divine Source

The Supreme Soul, knows and respects our different natures and so offers various physical, intellectual, and meditational yoga’s. All are meant to be devotional offerings and so spiritual paths that lead to devotional yoga, or bhakti yoga. All these yoga’s contain elements of one another - that is, they are mutually inclusive, not exclusive.

A bhakti yogi cultivates pure love for the Supreme Soul with deep knowledge, not blind sentiment. Knowledge plays a vital role in true spiritual devotion: to know is to love. It’s this love that is the goal of bhakti. Devotion means acting for the Divine Source. So, we eat in order to keep the body healthy so that we may serve the one we love; we work in order to offer the fruits of our actions to the Divine Source, we study in order to understand that Divine Source and we meditate to offer our love to the Divine Source. This giving to the Supreme Soul is the essence of spiritual life and life’s perfection.

Those who are advanced in any field naturally associate with others in their field, whether it be music, sports, politics, scholarship, martial arts, fine arts, or whatever. Those who wish to become spiritually attuned will naturally try seeking those who are like-minded and share their understanding of the goal of life.

If you have any questions or comments, you are most welcome to write to vccgovinda@outlook.com

***(This article appeared before in our magazine "Spirit Soul" and this is an adapted version)**

With thanks to our author of the original article, H.D Goswami

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