

Self-Awareness through Yoga

by Ashok Nalamalapu

There is a mis perception that yoga is a bunch of postures. It is way more than that. Through yoga, yogis actually reach enlightenment.

The fact that yoga has lasted more than 3000 years proves that it has benefits to offer. Yoga helps us to be more aware of our Selves. It helps us to be peaceful, patient and calm. It helps us to concentrate more and gain knowledge.

Swami Vivekananda, an Indian Spiritual Leader, defined four predominant yoga paths Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga and Raja Yoga. By practicing any of these paths with devotion, one can realize Self. However, Swamiji said that by practicing all these four paths, one becomes a complete person.

Bhakti Yoga is the yogic path of devotion and love. This path is followed by repeating mantras and offering prayers to God with devotion and love. Sri Rama Krishna, an Indian prophet, exemplified unconditional devotion to God. Christ expressed unconditional love for humans.

Karma Yoga is the yogic path of action or work. *Bhagavat Gita*, an ancient Indian scripture, advises "Work incessantly and be unattached to the fruits of the work." Gandhi followed this path in his service, working towards human equality and freedom.

Jnana Yoga is the yogic path of knowledge. Sages say through knowledge we can realize our Soul. Our Soul is infinite. It exists beyond time, space and causation. It does not have form. It is not born and does not die. Our Soul is our Self. True Self is like the sky. During our life, miseries and diseases come and go like clouds. However, our Self remains strong like the sky. Henry David Thoreau gained knowledge by spending time in nature searching for the Truth.

Raja Yoga is the path of controlling the internal senses of both body and mind. Swami Vivekananda was a master of this path.

Sage Patanjali laid out eight paths or limbs to this royal road of yoga.

1. Yama is the outward focus. One must tell only the truth. One can't steal, be violent, or intentionally injure others by words or deeds. One must not receive bribes from others.
2. Niyama is inward focus. To practice Niyama, one must keep one's body clean, wake up early, study, be content, and strive for pure thoughts, words and deeds. Purity is central to practicing Niyama. Eating pure food is important. The food that we eat generates the forces in our bodies. You might observe that the vegetarian diet of herbivorous animals such as elephants and giraffes contributes to their general calm, whereas meat eating animals such as lions and fox are restless.
3. Pranayama is channeling our Prana by controlling the breath. We have a thin canal called Sushumna which starts at the bottom of the spine and ends at the crown of head. Kundalini energy lies dormant at the bottom of Sushumna. Pranayama raises Kundalini. As a result one can experience wonderful powers, joy and visions.
4. Asanas are body postures. This Hatha Yoga is commonly known as "Yoga." Asanas make our bodies stronger and help us sit longer while meditating. Asanas purify our bodies and help us live longer.
5. Pratyahara is concentration to control our senses.
6. Dharana is the next level of concentration. One focuses on an external or an internal object. Chanting a word like "Aum" pronounced as "Om" is an example.
7. Dhyana is the next higher level of concentration called meditation. Meditation is a single stream of unbroken concentration. We focus continuously on an internal object or observe bodily sensations or observe our breath.
8. Samadhi is the final stage of enlightenment, where one is in a thought free state. In this state, ego is not attached to the Self. It is the super conscious state. In this stage the yogi is enlightened.

Most religions say, "Know thyself." Wouldn't it be wonderful to remove suffering, experience natural joy and know ourselves? Lao Tsu said, "Knowing others is wisdom. Knowing self is enlightenment." Doing asanas is a great start. However, to experience permanent bliss, the ancient path of yoga offers much more than asanas.

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