

RAJA YOGA
Path to Enlightenment

by Donalee Schofield

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Hinduism encompasses many philosophies and paths, all generally accepting the authority of the Vedas, scriptures thought to be Divinely inspired. Properly known as Santana Dharma, or the eternal religion, its origins blur into Indian antiquity. One of the oldest of six darsana (viewpoints) from post-Vedic Hinduism, the philosophy of yoga is outlined in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. Called raja yoga, the "royal road" or ashtanga yoga for its eight-limbs, this classical yoga system is comprehensive, encompassing techniques from all four of the main yogas and more. Raja yoga outlines a practical and systematic methodology for expanding one's consciousness through meditation and understanding the transformations along this path to enlightenment.

The main source for the teaching of raja yoga is a body of works called the Yoga Sutras, written by Maharishi, or great sage, Patanjali, also known as Govinda Yogindra (the light-filled king of the yogis). There are many translations of the original Sanskrit, and some have said that it need not be taken that one must be a cloistered renunciate in order to gain enlightenment -- that with the growth of consciousness obtained from correct understanding of the Yoga Sutras, balance in living naturally follows and enlightenment is easily attained, regardless of position in life. The steps, however, must be adhered to completely, and there are no shortcuts in the process. The spiritual growth one attains is incremental and will not deteriorate over time. It is therefore better to work wholeheartedly for a short time than half-heartedly for a long time.

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras outline eight limbs or means to enlightenment. Starting with preliminary outer aspects, the yogi begins with right attitudes, ethics and lifestyles. A competent teacher (guru) is necessary, as is a deep longing for truth and God. One must have purity, patience and perseverance. The next steps are control of the outer aspects: body, breath and senses. Integration (samyama) then begins and in the final stages concentration naturally leads to meditation and then to contemplation where ecstasy is reached. "When concentration, meditation and contemplation form one sequential act, then is sanyama achieved. As a result of sanyama comes the shining forth of the light." ⁱ

Yoga means yoke or union. It is the science of joining: of joining the body and mind, the waking consciousness with its most expanded state, the lower self with the higher Self. Ruled by our desires, we are blind to the Ultimate Truth, the Supreme Bliss that underlies all being. As long as we follow the lead of our senses and of our egos, we cannot find our true Selves and the liberation that discovery brings. "He who has overcome involvement with sense objects, and actions; who is free from ego-tainted plannings - that man is said to have attained Union." ⁱⁱ

There are many types of yoga, including the four yogas which, according to some sources, correspond to the four levels in the caste system. Each of these yogas is suited to a specific temperament and is direct in its approach, addressing a dominant modality of expression or lifestyle. They all aim for immediate ascent of consciousness to the state of Union and Ultimate Truth. Jnana yoga is the path of knowledge and meditation for the Brahmin caste, or priests; karma yoga is the path of duty and action for the kshatriya caste, or warriors; bhakti yoga is the path of devotion and worship for the vaishya caste, or producers and merchants; and hatha yoga is the path of training the body for the shudra caste, or untouchables, and is best known in the West today.

Raja, meaning royal, recognizes that all yogas are related and synthesizes their components into a practical and sovereign path which can be carried out by anyone with the will to do so. Through willpower and commitment one comes to know their own psychological, mental and subconscious processes and removes the obstacles to union. Postures (asanas) from hatha yoga are used to help clear the passage of energy and spirit in the body, and for awakening its creative power. Through complete and total devotion and desire for only the Ultimate Truth, as a bhakti yogi desires only the love of God, the chains of all other desires are broken. Through selfless service to others as is the goal

of karma yoga, one can ultimately renounce the fruits of action and surrender the ego along with the senses. Like jnana yoga, the main practice of raja yoga is meditation; only rather than seeking knowledge that will bring direct experience of Truth, it seeks direct experience of Truth that will bring Ultimate knowledge.

Differentiating between the conscious subject, or soul (purusa) and its manifested nature (prakrti), the goal in raja yoga is kaivalya moksa, isolation and liberation of purusa from the bondage of prakrti. Normally, the mind is caught up in prakrti in its three manifestations (gunas): rhythm (sattva), mobility (rajas), and inertia (tamas). Through the lenses of the gunas, the mind interacts with the kaleidoscope of prakrti and goes through its many daily modifications which make up the frenzied waves of activity (vritti) of the mind.

An ego or personality is created as one identifies with the ever-present gunas and vritti and loses touch with purusa, the soul that manifested them in the first place. "The sense of personality is due to the identification of the knower with the instruments of knowledge."ⁱⁱⁱ The ego is fooled into believing that prakrti can provide happiness, but as everything in prakrti is transitory, it cannot find the Eternal Bliss that purusa seeks. One is caught in the cycle of samsara, looking to prakrti for fulfilment it cannot provide. A theistic element is brought into play here as the Supreme purusa (Isvara), eternally independent from prakrti. As the ego is made up from the world of prakrti it will not release its bonds easily. If the will is not strong enough to surrender the ego, it can be sacrificed in self-surrender to Isvara. "By intense devotion to Isvara, knowledge of Isvara is gained."^{iv}

Through non-attachment and the practice of quieting the mind, one can come to differentiate the Self from the gunas and become aware of the ignorance (avidya) that binds us to samsara. Discrimination (viveka) develops between the world of prakrti and purusa, the piece of the Divine within. Once one can recognize this inherent duality, one can cultivate the absence of passion (vairagya) for the world of prakrti and come to know oneself as purusa. "Non-attachment is freedom from longing for all objects of desire, either earthly or traditional, either here or hereafter. The consummation of this non-attachment results in an exact knowledge of the spiritual man when liberated from the qualities or gunas."^v

A practical path to recognizing this duality is clearly outlined in Patanjali's eight limbs. The first of the eight limbs is self-restraint (yama). It is the control of oneself in thought, word and deed. It includes non-violence (ahimsa), truthfulness (satya); non-covetousness (asthya), continence or chastity (brahmacharya); and abstinence from avarice or greed (aparagriha), which includes non-attachment to worldly possessions.

The second limb is observances (niyama) and includes internal and external purity (saucha) including bodily care, daily bathing and proper diet; contentment (santosha); austerities (tapas) meaning egolessness, humility and selfless service; study of the scriptures (svadhyaya); and devotion to the Supreme purusa (Ishvarapranidhana).

The third limb is positions (asana) where control of the body is learned. Asanas strengthen and purify the body and the nervous system, developing the foundation for inner yoga practice. The main point of asanas in raja yoga is to allow one to sit comfortably in meditation for long periods. Seating should be firm as a rock, with the head, shoulders and hips held in a straight line so that the spinal column is freed as all action happens along it. Start with a minimum of ten minutes per day, preferably practising both at dawn and dusk, or if that is not possible, upon rising and retiring, and in an area reserved especially for meditation.

Once established in yama, niyama and asana, one may move onto the next five limbs, starting with the control and expansion of life force (prana) which is done through the breath (pranayama). The breath is composed of three parts: inhaling (puraka), restraining (kumbhaka) and exhaling (rechaka). The breathing exercises balance hemispheres of the brain through alternating nostrils and balancing inhalation with exhalation. By emphasizing the restraint in between, the breathing slows and the mind begins to calm. Conscious attention to breathing is the direct experience of the present moment, and brings awareness to the vritti in the mind. With patience and attention the mind-waves begin to slow and one is able to experience the peace that resides in that space between the breath.

The breath is intimately connected with the prana or energy which travels through the body. Two currents, sun (pingala) and moon (ida) start in the brain and form a figure eight, crossing at the top and bottom of the spine. These currents deposit prana throughout the body with the surplus being deposited along centres (chakras) in the spine. Through the breath one has direct control over the prana and access to the chakras and can transform the sexual energy (kundalini) which sits at the lower chakra into spiritual energy (ojas) by moving it up the spine to the top chakra at the pineal gland. This is the specific goal of kundalini yoga.

In both kundalini and raja yoga psychic powers (siddhis) can be developed such as telepathy, clairvoyance, telekinesis, levitation and awareness of past lives. These are considered incidental and can be obstacles to development, as they are still manifestations of prakrti. The goal is freedom from the senses, including the higher ones. Only by suspending all the modifications of the mind can one achieve the stillness required to access the spiritual realm.

Inner spiritual focus or abstraction (prathyahara) is the fifth limb of raja yoga where the mind turns inward. The senses should not be suppressed but withdrawn, and then the perception becomes spiritual. "The only way to find if there be a soul is to be something which is not the body."^{vi} Drawn away from the senses, the mind is deprived of its active manifestation through the lenses of the gunas and the waves of vritti, and this breaks the cycle of desire. By preventing the externalization of the mind it draws inward towards the seed-desire, the root of the mind, and leads naturally to the seed-content of concentration.

Concentration (dharana), the seventh limb, is the continuous, uninterrupted flow of attention towards any one subject (pratyaya), concrete or abstract. These are seeds for transformation and are commonly geometric figures (yantras), sounds (mantras), or colours. Mental restlessness is finally controlled through a passion to know, an interest and inquiry into the truth. This state of concentration is an ascendent state of consciousness, an expansion of awareness distinct from waking, sleeping and dreaming. The mind becomes quiescent where, finally, reality is seen in its reflection. "Concentration of the mind is the source of all knowledge."^{vii} The link with prakrti is now severed and consciousness naturally flows back into its source, to purusa.

With consciousness completely absorbed in purusa, the final limb is when concentration is sustained and the mind reaches a superconscious state of absorption (samadhi). Samadhi is a gradual illumination which has two main categories: with support (samprajnata), and without support (asamprajnata). In samprajnata, the essence of the pratyaya is realized in four sub-stages and one comes to know its ultimate identity, its union beyond the subject-object realm. "To him whose vrittis (modifications of the substance of the mind) are entirely controlled, there eventuates a state of identity with, and similarity to that which is realized. The knower, knowledge and the field of knowledge become one, just as the crystal takes to itself the colours of that which is reflected in it."^{viii}

Asamprajnata is a state of consciousness where even this knowledge has been surpassed and no object is supported. Here one loses all desires, subtle desires (vasanas), subconscious impressions (samskaras), and all external consciousness, including the awareness of duality and multiplicity. This

is Unified consciousness, the Supreme State where awareness of self (asmita) is lost and purusa is immersed in its own eternal nature. Purusa recognizes the Ultimate Bliss of its own being, of its own nature, and of its independence from prakrti. "The yogi ever united thus with the Self, with the mind controlled goeth to Peace, to the Supreme Bliss that abideth in Me."^{ix} This is direct experience of the Absolute, of Ultimate Truth, beyond all emotions or imaginings, beyond all description. Here, Isvara is revealed. "In Isvara, the Gurudeva, the germ of all knowledge expands into infinity."^x

To think that we are no more than our bodies is illusion (maya). One way to know this truth is through renouncing the trappings of the body, emotions and mind, and experiencing the release of the soul. As one learns to remove the mind from the chains of the body, so one learns to remove the soul from the chains of the mind; and that independence is freedom from all bondage and suffering. Raja yoga is one way to attain this experience. Raja yoga is the royal road, a comprehensive and practical eight-fold path that allows one to use their will for truth to quieten the desires that bind us to this world, and to lift consciousness into direct experience of the soul, the true state of our being, and beyond.

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ENDNOTES

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- ii Julian Lee, "Celibacy, Meditation & Enlightenment: The Gita Chapter 6", Bhagavad Gita, <http://www.alaska.net/~appleb/GitaSixth.html>, Apple Blossom Contemplative Order (1998).
- iii Alice Bailey and Djwhal Khul, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, <http://www.netnews.org/bk/patanjali/toc.html>, (February 2, 1998). Sutra 2:6.
- iv Ibid, Sutra 1:23
- v Ibid, Sutras 1:15,16
- vi Swami Vivekenanda, "Six Lessons on Raja Yoga", The Complete Works of Swami Vivekenanda, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama), 1964, p. 39.
- vii Ibid, p. 36
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- ix Julian Lee, "Celibacy, Meditation & Enlightenment: The Gita Chapter 6", Bhagavad Gita, <http://www.alaska.net/~appleb/GitaSixth.html>, Apple Blossom Contemplative Order (1998).
- x Alice Bailey and Djwhal Khul, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, <http://www.netnews.org/bk/patanjali/toc.html> (February 2, 1998). Sutra 1:25