



## The Branches of Yoga from *Yoga Journal's Yoga Basics*

**Whether you are devotional or intellectual in nature, yoga has a path for you.**

**By Mara Carrico**

In ancient times yoga was often referred to as a tree, a living entity with roots, a trunk, branches, blossoms, and fruit. Hatha yoga is one of six branches; the others include raja, karma, bhakti, jnana, and tantra yoga. Each branch with its unique characteristics and function represents a particular approach to life. Some people may find one particular branch more inviting than another. However, it is important to note that involvement in one of these paths does not preclude activity in any of the others, and in fact you'll find many paths naturally overlapping.

### **Raja Yoga**

Raja means "royal," and meditation is the focal point of this branch of yoga. This approach involves strict adherence to the eight "limbs" of yoga as outlined by Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras*. Also found in many other branches of yoga, these limbs, or stages, follow this order: ethical standards, *yama*; self-discipline, *niyama*; posture, *asana*; breath extension or control, *pranayama*; sensory withdrawal, *pratyahara*; concentration, *dharana*; meditation, *dhyana*; and ecstasy or final liberation, *samadhi*. Raja yoga attracts individuals who are introspective and drawn to meditation. Members of religious orders and spiritual communities devote themselves to this branch of yoga. However, even though this path suggests a monastic or contemplative lifestyle, entering an ashram or monastery is not a prerequisite to practicing raja yoga.

### **Karma Yoga**

The next branch is that of karma yoga or the path of service, and none of us can escape this pathway. The principle of karma yoga is that what we experience today is created by our actions in the past. Being aware of this, all of our present efforts become a way to consciously create a future that frees us from being bound by negativity and selfishness. Karma is the path of self-transcending action. We practice karma yoga whenever we perform our work and live our lives in a selfless fashion and as a way to serve others. Volunteering to serve meals in a soup kitchen or signing up for a stint with the Peace Corps or Habitat for Humanity are prime examples of selfless service associated with the karma yoga path.

### **Bhakti Yoga**

Bhakti yoga describes the path of devotion. Seeing the divine in all of creation, bhakti yoga is a positive way to channel the emotions. The path of bhakti provides us with an opportunity to cultivate acceptance and tolerance for everyone we come into contact with.

Bhakti yogis express the devotional nature of their path in their every thought, word, and deed—whether they are taking out the trash or calming the anger of a loved one. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., are prime examples of bhakti yogis. The life and work of Mother Teresa epitomize the combination of the karma and bhakti yoga paths with devotional aspects of bhakti and the selfless service of karma yoga.

### **Jnana Yoga**

If we consider bhakti to be the yoga of the heart, then jnana yoga is the yoga of the mind, of wisdom, the path of the sage or scholar. This path requires development of the intellect through the study of the scriptures and texts of the yogic tradition. The jnana yoga approach is considered the most difficult and at the same time the most direct. It involves serious study and will appeal to those who are more intellectually inclined. Within the context of our Western religious traditions, Kabalistic scholars, Jesuit priests, and Benedictine monks epitomize jnana yogis.

### **Tantra Yoga**

Probably the most misunderstood or misinterpreted of all the yogas, tantra, the sixth branch, is the pathway of ritual, which includes consecrated sexuality. The key word here is "consecrated," which means to make sacred, to set apart as something holy or hallowed. In tantric practice we experience the Divine in everything we do. A reverential attitude is therefore cultivated, encouraging a ritualistic approach to life. It is amusing to note that, although tantra has become associated exclusively with sexual ritual, most tantric schools actually recommend a celibate lifestyle. In essence, tantra is the most esoteric of the six major branches. It will appeal to those yogis who enjoy ceremony and relate to the feminine principle of the cosmos, which yogis call shakti. If you see—and are deeply moved by—the significance behind celebration and ritual (holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and other rites of passage), tantra yoga may be for you. Many tantric yogis find magic in all types of ceremony, whether it be a Japanese tea ceremony, the consecration of the Eucharist in a Catholic mass, or the consummation of a relationship.

### **Combining the Paths**

You may already be involved in one or more of these branches. For example, you may already be a hatha yogi or yogini practicing the postures with a teacher or by yourself. If you are a hospice volunteer for AIDS patients, or a participant in a Big Brother/Big Sister program, you are actively practicing karma yoga. Perhaps reading this book will spark an in-depth study of yoga philosophy, setting you on the path of jnana yoga. Remember you need not be limited to one expression—you may practice hatha yoga, taking care of your physical body, while simultaneously cultivating the lifestyle of a bhakti yogi, expressing your compassion for everyone you meet. Trust that whichever avenue of yogic expression draws your interest, it will probably be the right yoga path for you.

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