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Exploring four popular approaches to four spiritual regimens: karma yoga, bhakti yoga, raja yoga and jnana yoga

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In modern Hindu texts, the most common summary of Hindu spiritual practice is the four yogas: karma (action), bhakti (devotion), raja (meditation) and jnana (knowledge). Let's start with a short description of each and then ponder the question, "Which yoga or yogas should I pursue at this time?"

Karma yoga is the path of action. It begins with refraining from what should not be done. Next we seek to renounce actions motivated solely by selfish desires, those actions that benefit only ourselves. Then comes the desire to conscientiously fulfill our duties in life. An important aspect of karma yoga is performing selfless service to help others. When we are successful, our work is transformed into worship. My paramaguru, Yogaswami of Sri Lanka, captured the essence of this ideal when he said, "All work must be done with the aim of reaching God."

Bhakti yoga is the path of devotion to and love of God. Practice focuses on listening to stories about God, singing devotional hymns, pilgrimage, intoning a mantra and worshiping in temples and one's home shrine. The fruition of bhakti yoga is an ever-closer rapport with the Divine, developing qualities that make communion possible--love, selflessness and purity--eventually leading to prapatti, self-effacement and total surrender to God. My guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, gave this insightful description: "God is love, and to love God is the pure path

prescribed in the Agamas (a category of revealed scripture). Veritably, these texts are God's own voice admonishing the samsari, reincarnation's wanderer, to give up love of the transient and adore instead the Immortal. How to love the Divine, when and where, with what mantras and visualizations and at what auspicious times, all this is preserved in the Agamas."

Raja yoga is the path of meditation. It is a system of eight progressive stages of practice: ethical restraints, religious observances, posture, breath control, withdrawal, concentration, meditation and enstasy, or mystic oneness. The focus is on restraining the modifications of the mind so that our awareness--which usually takes on the forms of the mind's modifications--can abide in its essential form. The restraint of these modifications is achieved through practice and detachment. My guru used the term consciousness to explain the modifications of the mind: "Consciousness and awareness are the same when awareness is totally identified with and attached to that which it is aware of. To separate the two is the artful practice of yoga."

Jnana yoga is the path of knowledge. It involves philosophical study and discrimination between the Real and the unreal. Though the word jnana is derived from the verbal root jna, which simply means knowing, it has a higher philosophical connotation. It is not only intellectual knowledge but also intuitive experience. It starts with the former and ends with the latter. Jnana yoga consists of three progressive practices: shravana (listening to scripture); manana--thinking and reflecting; and nididhyasana--constant and profound meditation. Four great saying from the Upanishads are often the subject of reflection: "Consciousness is Brahman;" "That thou art;" "This Self is Brahman;" and "I am Brahman." Swami Chinmayananda, founder of Chinmaya Mission, taught: "The goal of jnana yoga is, through discrimination, to differentiate between the Real and the unreal and finally come to realize one's identity with the Supreme Reality."

Having looked in brief at each of the four primary yogas, let's focus on how they are approached in various schools of thought. This may help you to choose the yoga (or yogas) that is right for you to practice at this state of your spiritual unfoldment.

The first and most widely known approach is to choose one of the yogas based on your temperament. The Vedanta Society of Southern California puts forth this approach on its website: "Spiritual aspirants can be broadly classified into four

psychological types: the predominantly emotional, the predominantly intellectual, the physically active, the meditative. There are four primary yogas designated to 'fit' each psychological type." In this approach, bhakti yoga is recommended for the predominantly emotional, jnana yoga for the intellectual, karma yoga for the physically active and raja yoga for the meditative person.

However, it is sometimes advised that seekers who are intellectually inclined should stay away from jnana yoga. Linda Johnson explains this in her book Hinduism for Idiots. "Think you're smart? Surprisingly, Hindu gurus often advise bright people to take up the path of devotion, not jnana yoga. That's because very intelligent people often benefit more by learning to open their hearts. Jnana yoga is not so much for intellectuals as for people with a strongly developed mystical sense and a burning desire for the actual experience of God Realization."

A second approach is to choose one of the yogas as your primary focus based on your temperament but to also practice the other three yogas in a secondary way. Swami Sivananda, founder of the Divine Life Society, maintained that though seekers naturally gravitate toward one path, the lessons of each of the paths must be integrated by every seeker if true wisdom is to be attained. The motto of his organization is, "Serve, Love, Meditate, Realize," referring respectively to the four yogas: karma, bhakti, raja and jnana.

A third approach emphasizes that one or another of the four yogas is the highest path and should be followed by everyone. It is common for Vaishnava organizations to put forth bhakti yoga, or devotional practices, as the path for all followers. That is to say, Vaishnavism focuses on self-transcending love and surrender as the principal means of liberation. In addition, karma yoga is advised as a purificatory preparation for the practices of devotion. Sri Ramanuja states that in preparation for meditation, or the contemplative remembrance of the Divine, one should engage in karma yoga.

Some Vedantic traditions put forth jnana yoga as the path for all. For example, in the Smarta tradition of Adi Shankara, karma yoga is performed as a preliminary sadhana leading one to jnana yoga, which is defined as meditation based on philosophical discrimination. This idea is found in Shankara's Vivekachudamani: "Work is for the purification of the mind, not for the perception of Reality. The realization of Truth is caused by discrimination, not in the least by ten millions of acts."

A fourth approach is that the practice of karma yoga, bhakti yoga and raja yoga constitute a prerequisite for taking up jnana yoga, or experiencing unity with God, enlightenment. Swami Ramakrishnananda of the Vishwa Dharma Mandalam in New York City wrote: "Before delving into jnana yoga, it is important that a disciple grows and develops in service, or karma yoga, in devotion to God, or bhakti yoga, and in meditation, or raja yoga, because in studying this philosophy without preparation one risks transforming oneself into a 'lip Vedantist,' a person who talks about that which he does not truly know."

Swami Vishnudevananda of Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres propounded a similar idea: "Before practicing jnana yoga, the aspirant needs to have integrated the lessons of the other yogic paths--for without selflessness and love of God, strength of body and mind, the search for Self Realization can become mere idle speculation."

Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami saw wisdom in this fourth approach. He stated, "Karma yoga and bhakti yoga are the necessary prelude to the higher philosophies and practices." In fact, he taught that the yogas (or padas) are cumulative stages. Moreover, none should be abandoned as one advances on the path. About bhakti, he said, "We never outgrow temple worship. It simply becomes more profound and meaningful as we progress through four spiritual levels. In [karma yoga or] the charya pada, the stage of selfless service, we attend the temple because we have to, because it is expected of us. In [bhakti] the kriya pada, the stage of worshipful sadhanas, we attend because we want to; our love of God is the motivation. In the yoga pada, we worship God internally, in the sanctum of the heart; yet even the yogi immersed in the superconscious depths of mind has not outgrown the temple. It is there--God's home on the earth plane--when the yogi returns to normal consciousness. So perfect is the temple worship of those who have traversed the jnana pada that they themselves become worship's object--living, moving temples."

Confused as to which yoga or yogas to choose? Of course if you have a teacher, this is an excellent point of discussion to have with him or her. If you don't have a teacher, then a conservative approach is to work first on karma yoga and bhakti yoga. These yogas work swiftly with the ego and clear all-important barriers to deeper realization, barriers too many neglect to resolve on the path. The benefits of their practice include a slow purification of the mind, developing of greater humility and selflessness and a growing sense of devotion and certainty that all our actions

are steadily moving us closer to God.