Yoga and the Hindu Tradition
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The term yoga means “to join and unite”, or, “to set seriously to work”. Yoga practiced seriously and regularly is believed to create a deep connection between the individual soul and the universe. There are many different forms of yoga, but only three forms were seriously developed and perfected by Hindus. The three main forms are, bhakti, karma and jnana. In the Hindu religion, yoga is primarily viewed as an eight-stage meditational path. This eight stage path was developed by the sage Patanjali in ancient times. Although there is not conclusive evidence to pinpoint the exact time Yoga was developed, the Yogic practice has been perfected over hundreds of years. (Forman, 1995)

The Vedas talk about the practice of Yoga and meditation, saying that wandering aesthetics regularly practiced meditation and yoga as a way to reach a higher state of being. Today the Hindu and Yogic tradition has shifted, and yoga is practiced under a Guru or a spiritual leader experienced in yoga.

Bhakti yoga is a form of yoga concerned with God and the experience of God in whatever form the devotee finds effective. The devotee focuses on God and God alone with the intention of someday reaching extreme love and compassion for God. A true practitioner of Bhakti recognizes that he is only truly devoted to God through the practice of yoga. The experience of this devotion is not easily expressed in words. Many people view Bhakti as a form of emotionalism, but this is a mistake. Through intuition and meditation, the devotee of bhakti will become closer to God and become less concerned with themselves. On the outside a true practitioner of this form of yoga may appear unnaturally calm and subdued. This is not the case however, because the true feelings of the practitioner are held on the inside. The outside appearance holds little significance while the feeling in the heart hold great power. Bhakti should be viewed as a form of yoga that strengthens the bond between the devotee and God. (Sivananada)

Karma yoga is the yoga form concerned with emotional and physical action. It is based on the belief that for every action, there is a reaction. The actions of a person are not separate from each other, but are all connected. There are three kinds of karma that affect humans. Kriyamana is the karma of the current work. This is the work and actions humans make in the present moment.

Sanchita is the accumulated actions of a person. Over time, consistent actions of the same nature can bring about certain reactions. Prarabha is the actions that have created the human of the present. The Vedas use the analogy of a man with a bow to describe the latter form of karma. A man has sent out an arrow, and is about to set off more arrows. These arrows, once set in motion cannot be turned back. This is the state of the present body and mind. All the actions of life have lead a person to the place he is currently in. It is in this place that yoga does its work, perfecting and coping with the results of past actions. Yoga guides the body through the past, helping it become more fruitful in the present. (Forman, 1993; Devananda, 1988)

Jnana yoga is the yoga form focused on knowledge. The devotee practices yoga to gain an understanding and wisdom. A serious practitioner of this form of yoga grows within themselves and becomes more familiar with their body and mind. After extensive practice, the devotee will be free from the powers of the mind and become more connected to the earth. It is believed that all the beings in the universe have the same heart and souls and are really one. Practicing yoga will bring the devotee closer to the universe. Meditation is used most often in this form of yoga. Jnana yoga is above all a common form of yoga in India, staying close to the Hindu belief of connectedness.

The eight stages of yoga were originally developed by Patanjali. Yama is the first stage of yoga, and acts as the moral jumping block for the other stages. There are five moral principles that must be followed; non harming, truthfulness, non stealing, chastity and less greed. The idea is that the practitioner will be undisturbed by vices and will instead be pure and virtuous. A devotee of Hindu yoga must follow this five morals before attempting to move on to the next stages.

Self purification is the next stage. In this stage the practitioner focuses on purifying the body and mind to be more open to God through five spiritually cleansing disciplines. These disciplines include, purity, contentment, asceticism, study and devotion to God. Once the soul is cleansed spiritually, the body and mind will in turn become clean.

Asana and pranayama are used to bring the body into a natural and peaceful state. This is the stage most concerned with the practice of yoga. The
asanas are the postures used in yoga to attain a state of openness. The various postures create different levels of peace in the mind. The pranayamas are the various breathing techniques used to control and focus the breath. Guided breathing and Asanas help raise awareness and understanding in the devotee. (Devananda, 1995)

Withdrawal of the senses and concentration are less of a regular practice and more of a personal discipline. Becoming less aware of particular senses, and simply sensing all at once with all parts of the senses creates a more concentrated individual. This concentration is essential to a yogi. Experienced yogis are able to let go of external expectancies, and draw their attention towards the present moment.

Meditation is a standard part of any yoga or Hindu practice. It is in the meditation that enlightenment occurs. Through regular meditation the devotee will reach a higher state of being and be free from daily worries and concerns. Enlightenment is the goal of the entire yoga and meditative practice. An enlightened person is considered to be awake in an intuitive and spiritual way. (Forman, 1993)

References