

**The Yoga Ladder in Indian Philosophical Systems:
Progressive Yoga Practices in the Bhagavad Gita**

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&

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of the "Yoga Ladder" within Indian philosophical systems, with a special emphasis on the Bhagavad Gita. The objective is to analyze the various stages and types of yoga, including Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Astanga Yoga, and Bhakti Yoga, and how they together serve as a progressive path towards self-realization and union with the Supreme Soul. The method applied involves a comprehensive review of ancient texts, philosophical treatises, and scholarly interpretations to understand the historical and conceptual development of yoga. The paper synthesizes insights from notable figures such as Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Prabhupada to elucidate the spiritual and practical aspects of yoga.

Key findings indicate that yoga is essential for achieving a state of bliss and mitigating suffering, as technological advancements alone have not led to true

happiness. The study identifies the threefold classification of human suffering and posits yoga as the ultimate solution. Additionally, the concept of the Yoga Ladder is introduced, illustrating how different yoga practices interconnect and lead to higher states of consciousness. The paper concludes that a thorough understanding and application of yoga can lead to self-realization and eternal bliss, aligning with the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita.

Introduction

Yoga, a profound and ancient practice originating from India, aims to harmonize the mind, body, and spirit. Rooted in the Sanskrit term "yuj," meaning to join or unite, yoga signifies the union of the individual soul with the divine. Traditionally encompassing physical postures, breath control, meditation, and ethical principles, yoga offers a holistic approach to well-being. It addresses modern life's stresses and challenges, guiding individuals towards inner peace and self-realization. This paper delves into the concept of the "Yoga Ladder," exploring various forms and stages of yoga as outlined in Indian philosophical systems, particularly the Bhagavad Gita.

1.1 Concept of Yoga

The word "Yoga" is a Sanskrit word and is derived from the root word "yuj" which as per Satyananda (1996) means "to attach, join, harness, yoke."¹

Dasgupta (1922) writes that Panini a sanskrit renowned grammarian in ancient times said that the term “yoga” can be derived from either of two roots: yujir yoga (to yoke) or yuj samādhau "to concentrate".² Bryant (2009) quotes Vyasadev defining the term “Yoga” as meaning Samadhi or absolute concentration.³

Swami Vivekananda (1980) says “The ultimate goal of all mankind, the aim and end of all religions, is but one—re-union with God, or, what amounts to the same, with the divinity which is every man's true nature. Both the goal and the methods employed for reaching it are called Yoga, a word derived from the same Sanskrit root as the English "yoke", meaning "to join", to join us to our reality, God”.⁴

Aurobindo (1992), a freedom fighter and philosopher, as quoted by Chaudhary, describes the yoga of the Gita as "a large, flexible and many-sided system with various elements, which are all successfully harmonized by a sort of natural and living assimilation".⁵ Bhardwaj (2019) says that “Yoga is the union of the individual soul with the supreme soul. Yoga is a practical path to self-realization, a means of attaining enlightenment by purifying the entire being. Yoga is the science that teaches us the method of uniting the individual soul with the Universal soul”.⁶

1.2 Necessity of Yoga

“Why talk or discuss about the concept of Yoga? How is it useful for us individually and collectively in this modern era? The fact is that the word “Yoga” has become so popular in the modern era that the whole world now knows about the word even though there may be different shades of what the word means to different people across the world. Yet, we must discuss why this concept is so important to be known. The answer lies in the need of all living beings including human beings to be in a state of happiness in this world, to exist happily, to lead a pleasant life free from problems. The Vedanta Sutra aphorism “*Anandamayo Abhayasat*”⁷ explains that our natural state of existence is actually blissful. We see that everyone without exception in this world is trying to become happy in this world, in fact all our endeavors are to become free from problems and to be positively happy. Our scientific achievements, technology etc is meant to make life comfortable. However in the most technologically advanced nation of the world, the USA, the statistics of Crime, Stress, Disease due to stress, Suicides, etc are horrible. So with all the modern achievements and technology at our disposal, we have failed to become completely free from problems and become happy. Instead we have become comfortably miserable. Amongst other things, people are also trying out Yoga as one of the solutions but the fact is that there is no other solution other than Yoga if one wants to lead a happy life.

yuktähära-vihärasya yukta-ceñöasya karmasu,

Yukta-svapnäva bodhasya, yogobhavati duïkha hä ⁸

“He who is regulated in his habits of eating, sleeping, recreation and work can mitigate all material pains by practicing the yoga system.”

1.3 Yoga – The True Solution to mitigate all suffering

Why is it that other solutions would be only patchwork solutions and not permanent solutions? To understand this we can take the example of a disease. In order to cure a disease, the first step taken by doctors or researchers is observation of the symptoms of the disease. Whenever we go to a doctor, he does not give us medicine right away. He first checks us in many different ways and then based on the symptoms which he or she has observed in us, the doctor draws his diagnosis of the disease. And then based on the diagnosis he gives the medicine. Similarly if we make an analysis of human life in general, we can come to the conclusion that people are trying to become happy and free from problems but it is not possible. Parmeshwaranand says that the Vedic scriptures classify all types of suffering into three broad categories called as Adhyatmika Klesa, Adhibhautika Klesa, Adhidaivika Klesa. Adhyatmika Klesa means suffering due to one's own body and mind. Examples are bodily disease, old age problems, mental stress and ailments etc. Adhibhautika Klesa refers to problems created by other living entities like microorganisms, insects, animals and other human beings. Adhidaivika klesa refers to natural calamities like earthquakes, famines, floods, drought etc. We can see all these three types of miseries very much prevalent in society, in the past, present and of course in the future. Even if someone is in a very good position materially, no one can escape the fourfold miseries of birth,

disease, old age and death.⁹ While common people do not see any solution to these problems, the Vedic scriptures including Bhagavad Gita inform us that Yoga is the solution to become free from these fourfold miseries and eternally live a blissful life. The scriptures also talk about the cause of this situation we are all in. They say the cause is that we are now disconnected from the Supreme Lord. Just like a fish disconnected with water can never be happy even if it gets all kinds of comforts and can become happy again if it is reconnected with water, similarly the spirit soul can be happy once again when it is reconnected with God.¹⁰

Another crude example is of a leaf which remains connected with the tree remains green but loses its freshness and color as soon as it disconnects from the tree. Just like no amount of facilities in terms of quality and quantity can satisfy a fish which is out of water, similarly no amount of facilities can satisfy the soul which is disconnected from God. We can see that in the futile attempts being made in the history of mankind till now. In a bid to become happy, all sorts of things have been exhaustively carried out. Mankind has seen the pinnacle of success in technology, comfort, medical research etc but nevertheless the problems remain. Therefore Yoga or reconnecting with God is the only solution. We see in Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna is in stress in the beginning and after hearing Bhagavad Gita he becomes free from stress. Therefore it is imperative that we also take Arjuna's example and apply the hymns of the Bhagavad Gita and the Srimad

Bhagavatam in our lives. However a diluted understanding of the concept of Yoga will only lead to diluted happiness. A deeper analysis and discussion on this would undoubtedly lead to the unlimited happiness for which we are always craving for. Hence the concept of Yoga needs to be discussed thoroughly, analysed and applied in our lives.¹¹

1.4 The Purpose of Yoga – The Blooming of Consciousness

As we discussed earlier, Yoga means joining or connecting. So when we talk about joining or adding, there have to be two entities. Who are these two entities? As quoted above, Agni Purana says the union of soul and the Supreme Soul or Jivatma and Paramatma is Yoga. Each one of us living in this world is a unique tiny infinitesimal soul, a part and parcel of the Supreme Soul, God. And since we have to join, it implies we are separated right now from God. So we are tiny spirit souls separated from the Lord just like sparks separated from a fire. The Bhagavad Gita gives information on the soul being a conscious living entity different from the body. The spirit soul is the living substance within the body which is inert in nature. The spirit soul is “conscious” whereas the body is not. Consciousness is a characteristic or symptom of the soul.¹²

Just like the light of a lamp can be muffled by putting shades over it similarly the consciousness of the soul is muffled in this world by different types

of bodies of which there are 84, 00,000 types. Sundararajan and Mukerji, identifies five levels of consciousness from Vedic scriptures. These are:

1. **avrta-cetana, covered consciousness – Trees, plants, creepers, mountains...**
2. **sankucita-cetana, contracted, shrunken consciousness – Aquatics, birds, beasts...**
3. **mukulita-cetana, budding consciousness – Only Human beings**
4. **vikasita-cetana, blossoming consciousness – Only Human beings**
5. **purna-vikasita-cetana, completely blossomed consciousness – Only Human beings.**¹³

The scriptures explain these various levels of consciousness. Examples of souls which are in the avrta stage or “covered consciousness” are trees. Trees and plants, for example, are almost inert. Trees have life as per the scriptures and this was proved even by our Indian scientist Jagdish Chandra Bose. However as we can commonly observe, trees do not have an advanced nervous system and the amount of pain they feel when they are cut etc is much less as compared to other living beings. This is due to their consciousness being covered. The more the consciousness is covered the lesser pain one feels. Other living entities, such as worms, insects and other animals are in sankucit or ‘shrunken consciousness’. Their consciousness is not as much covered as the plants, but it is not fully developed.

Human beings have mukulita 'or' budding consciousnesses. A bud appears to be underdeveloped, but it has the potential to develop into a flower. Human being also has budding consciousness and a similar potential: it appears underdeveloped like the animals', but humans have the innate ability to develop their consciousness to an almost unlimited extent, up to the point of knowing and realizing God.

Vedanta Sutra starts with the aphorism "*Athato Brahma Jignasa*" or "Now, after attaining this human body, inquire about the Absolute Truth". So the Vedic scriptures value the human form of life and consider it to be the most elevated and sacred species. When a human being begins to do "Brahma Jignasa" or sincere inquiry regarding the Absolute Truth, his bud-like underdeveloped consciousness begins to expand or evolve. That is the 'blossoming' state of consciousness. When, as a result of his inquiry, he practices Yoga or regulated spiritual discipline, he evolves further and further. Finally, he attains complete God realisation, the 'fully blossomed state of consciousness.'¹⁴

One gets a human body after being in the other lower eighty lacs species. Gradually, each soul evolves through the various stages of consciousness—covered, shrunken, and budding. At the budding stage, the embodied soul has the chance to develop fully his spiritual consciousness by awakening his relationship

with God, the Supreme Being. If the soul neglects that opportunity, he may again undergo transmigration through the covered, shrunken and budding stages.

The purpose of Yoga is to for a soul in the human body to achieve the fully blossomed state of consciousness. One might ask what is the benefit of a soul achieving the “*purnavikasita*” or “fully blossomed” state of consciousness.¹⁵ The scriptures explain that this state of the soul is his natural state and the Vedanta Sutra says “*Anandamayo Abhyasat*”.¹⁶ The Supreme Lord Is full of joy. And the soul being part and parcel of God is also full of joy in his natural uncovered state. However as soon as there is a covering of any level, the natural joyous state of the soul is covered by the body which has the opposite characteristic of “nirananda” or “unhappiness” or “suffering”. The purpose of yoga therefore is to remove this covering of the material body so as the bring out the soul from a state of suffering to a state of everlasting, ever-increasing boundless joy.¹⁷

1.5 The Concept of Yoga Ladder

There are different types of yoga. Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Raj Yoga, Hatha Yoga, Astanga Yoga, Bhakti Yoga have been mentioned several times in Bhagavad Gita and other Indian Philosophical Systems. Bhardwaj says that whether they be karma yoga, bhakti yoga, jnana yoga or raja yoga, they pave the way for the lifting up of human consciousness to a higher and nobler realm of

light, love and life with divine harmony and joy. The term “yoga ladder” is under explored in the academic world and otherwise. A lot of in-depth research has been done on yoga and different types of yoga but the term “yoga ladder” remains untapped.¹⁸ According to Prabhupada “The process of linking oneself with the Supreme is called yoga. It may be compared to a ladder for attaining the topmost spiritual realization. This ladder begins from the lowest material condition of the living entity and rises up to perfect self-realization in pure spiritual life. According to various elevations, different parts of the ladder are known by different names. But all in all, the complete ladder is called yoga and may be divided into three parts, namely Jnana-yoga, Dhyana-yoga and Bhakti-yoga.”¹⁹

Bhardwaj gives various definitions of yoga in his paper “The word yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root ‘yuj’, which means to yoke or to unite. In later times, however, another technical meaning came to be associated with the term, and this is derived from “yujirsamadhau”, which means “contemplation”, or “absorption”.²⁰ The oldest use of the word yoga, as found in the vedic literature, Atharvaveda indicates a union of various things.²¹ (ii) The Kathopanishada states: “The supreme path begins when the five senses and the mind are stilled and when the intellect is silent. This tranquility of the senses is yoga. (iii) The Yoga Washistha defines yoga “as a device by which one go across the ocean of suffering.”²²

While there exist a lot of research papers and thesis separately on yoga and on each one of the yoga systems including Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Astanga Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, there exists a gap of a work which ties up all these yoga systems and explains the connections between them. As quoted above, Prabhupada says that the complete ladder is called yoga and therefore there exists a deep connection between the yoga systems, a connection hitherto not explored academically. What would be benefits of knowing this connection? A lot of things would be clear. Presently, there exists a misconception that a practitioner can take up to any yoga system they prefer or find convenient. Or that all yoga systems are the same or lead to the same destination.²³ Bhardwaj concludes in his paper by saying” There are different paths of yoga, all leading to the same goal of self-realization. All the paths of yoga are like different spokes of a wheel, they all meet at the same centre: self-realization.” While this conclusion has some element of truth in it that self realization does occur in all systems as an intermediate goal, the statement is not true in its entirety. The analogy of a ladder more suits to the paths of yoga rather than the spokes of a wheel. This work aims to prove the same through further research on the matter.²⁴

1.6 The Yoga Ladder - A Ladder connecting the Jiva and the Supreme

What exactly is this concept of Yoga Ladder? Is it something which is imaginary? Or it is real? When we try to answer these questions and analyse the

whole yoga process we see that the word Yoga consists of the whole process of the *Jivatma* or spirit or soul connecting with the Supreme Lord and there are various stages of connection. Therefore if Yoga is the entire ladder connecting the Jiva with the Lord, the various stages constitute different rungs of this ladder and are named as Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Astanga Yoga and Bhakti yoga.

Yoga is a ladder and is not a single step. It is a ladder starting with the first step of Karma Kanda leading to Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Astanga Yoga and finally the last rung being Bhakti Yoga. While a practitioner can simply move from Karma Kanda to Bhakti Yoga linearly rung by rung first being a Karma Kandi, then a Karma Yogi, Jnana Yogi, Astanga Yogi and then a Bhakti Yogi, there are several other possibilities of a non linear route ending not with the last rung of Bhakti yoga but somewhere on the preceding rungs. We see that in such cases, one may be known as a Jnana Yogi or an Astanga Yogi and attain different destinations after death. The goal of Karma Kanda is Karma Yoga, the goal of Karma Yoga is Jnana yoga or Astanga Yoga, the goal and destination of a Jnana yogi or Astanga Yogi is Brahman, Brahmajyoti or the undifferentiated infinite effulgence of the Supreme Absolute Truth. Also there can be different shades of a Bhakti Yogi and accordingly their destinations will be different. In general the Bhakti yogi will attain the spiritual Vaikuntha planets where they get to worship the Supreme Absolute truth personally.

On the level of Karma Kanda, if a soul wants to enjoy materially in this world, there are legal and illegal ways to enjoy. Essentially a soul has come from the spiritual world to enjoy independently of the Supreme Lord. Having come here to this world and being entangled here and also suffering various miseries, the soul has to take to the path of Yoga to mitigate its miseries. The path starts with Karma Kanda or legally enjoying material objects which is an integral part of Varnasrama, the perfect social system. The four purusarthas are Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha and they are in sequence. Meaning, preceding Kama or material enjoyment are first Dharma (Religiosity) and then Artha (Wealth). The right way to enjoy materially therefore is to accept the authority of the Vedas and follow its instructions to enjoy. By doing this, one gets purified and progresses to the fourth purusartha which is Moksha or liberation. Why liberation because the soul being spiritual in nature can never be satisfied by material enjoyment and eventually getting frustrated, searches for the path of liberation, Moksha. At this juncture, the Karma Kandi makes a transition into a Karma Yogi whose mood has changed from attachment to detachment in the mode of goodness. We discussed that a Karma Yogi is one who performs his prescribed duties, worships the Devatas or demigods and the Supreme Lord with the understanding that the demigods are different limbs of the body of the Lord. The Karma yogi becomes self realized acquiring Jnana or experiencing the soul from within. He becomes blissful in

Samadhi or complete absorption in the supreme. At this juncture he makes a transition into Jnana yoga, renounces his prescribed duties and becomes a Sanyasi or a renunciant. The goal therefore of Karma Kanda is Karma Yoga and the goal of Karma Yoga is Jnana Yoga. Those Jnana yogis who are not offensive in nature meaning that they do not deride the form of the Lord, stating that the Supreme Absolute truth has no form, and those who add little Bhakti into their Sadhana, attain their destination after death which is impersonal Brahman or Brahmajyoti, the infinite effulgence of the Lord. Jnana Yoga being sattvic in nature and being a process within the modes of nature, requires a little bit of Bhakti to give a transcendental result i.e Brahman. An accomplished Karma Yogi, instead of taking the path of Jnana Yoga may take to the path of Astanga Yoga directly. He may begin Astanga Yoga along with Karma Yoga and continue his prescribed duties at the same time. Lord Krishna mentions in the sixth chapter of Bhagavad Gita that during the initial stages of Astanga Yoga named Yogaruruksu, work is the means while in the advanced stage called Yogarudha, renunciation of work is the means. In the advanced stage of trance in Astanga Yoga called Samadhi, one obtains boundless bliss and one realizes the Paramatma, the four handed form all pervading form of the Lord who resides in every atom and the heart of every living being. The Astanga Yogi performs a little bit of Bhakti along with his astanga yoga practices and becomes qualified to go to Brahman or Brahmajyoti. His

destination like the Jnana yogi is the Brahmajyoti, the effulgence of the Supreme Lord.

Bhakti yoga, the last rung of the Yoga ladder is connecting with the Lord in devotion or devotional service. Loving service performed in devotion to the Lord is called Bhakti yoga. The beauty of Bhakti yoga is that from any level of one's consciousness, one can take to Bhaktiyoga.

So a Vikarmi or a person who is a sinner, completely impure or a Karma Kandi one who is following Varnasrama dharma, a Karma Yogi, a Jnana Yogi, an Astanga Yogi, all of these can take to Bhakti from their level. One does not need to take to any other yoga systems in order to raise their consciousness. One can take to Bhakti right from the beginning. Bhakti yoga therefore is not only the last rung in the ladder of yoga but is also like an elevator which is faster than going by the staircase of the yoga systems. How can anyone come to Bhakti yoga? What is the process to come to Bhakti yoga? The answer is only by the association of a pure devotee, an accomplished Bhakti yogi, one can make the transition to Bhakti yoga from any platform. In the Caitanya Caritamrta, a Bhakti literature, by Krishna das Kaviraj by Prabhupada it is given;

According to their karma, all living entities are wandering throughout the entire universe. Some of them are being elevated to the upper planetary systems,

and some are going down into the lower planetary systems. Out of many millions of wandering living entities, one who is very fortunate gets an opportunity to associate with a bona fide spiritual master by the grace of Krishna. By the mercy of both Krishna and the spiritual master, such a person receives the seed of the creeper of devotional service.²⁵

Bhakti yoga is the only yoga in which the worshipper worships a personal God like Lord Visnu, Lord Rama or Lord Krishna. All other systems like Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga and Astanga yoga aim for impersonal liberation or merging in the Brahmajyoti. This type of liberation is called Sayujya Mukti. Bhakti yoga offers other types of personal liberations like Salokya, Sarsti, Samipya and Sarupya. Salokya is living on the same planet as the Supreme Lord, Sarsti is having the same opulences as the Lord, Samipya is always being in association with the Supreme Lord and Sarupya is having the same form as the Lord.

Since Bhakti can be mixed with desire for material enjoyment, desire for liberation, desire for mystic powers, there is a palette of different practices and practitioners of Bhakti yoga. One can be performing Karma misra Bhakti yoga or Bhakti yoga mixed with the desire for material enjoyment. Another could be a Jnana misra Bhakti yogi performing Bhakti for the sake of liberation. Another could be a yoga misra Bhakti yogi adopting the process of astanga yoga with a mood of Bhakti yoga. And then there could be a pure Bhakti yogi with no mixture

at all. All of the mixed Bhakti yogis get their desires fulfilled and then attain the spiritual planets for personal association with the Supreme Lord.

The process of linking oneself with the Supreme is called yoga. It may be compared to a ladder for attaining the topmost spiritual realization. This ladder begins from the lowest material condition of the living entity and rises up to perfect self-realization in pure spiritual life. According to various elevations, different parts of the ladder are known by different names. But all in all, the complete ladder is called yoga and may be divided into three parts, namely Jnana-yoga, Dhyana-yoga and Bhakti-yoga.

In conclusion, Prabhupada (1972) says that “The culmination of all kinds of yoga practices lies in bhakti yoga. All other yogas are but means to come to the point of bhakti in bhakti-yoga. Yoga actually means bhakti-yoga; all other yogas are progressions toward the destination of bhakti-yoga. From the beginning of karma-yoga to the end of bhakti-yoga is a long way to self-realization. Karma-yoga, without fruitive results, is the beginning of this path. When karma-yoga increases in knowledge and renunciation, the stage is called jnana-yoga. When jnana-yoga increases in meditation on the Supersoul by different physical processes, and the mind is on Him, it is called astanga-yoga. And when one surpasses the astanga-yoga and comes to the point of the Supreme Personality of Godhead Krishna, it is called bhakti yoga, the culmination. Factually, bhakti-yoga

is the ultimate goal, but to analyze bhakti-yoga minutely one has to understand these other yogas. The yogi who is progressive is therefore on the true path of eternal good fortune. One who sticks to a particular point and does not make further progress is called by that particular name: karma-yogi, jnana-yogi or dhyana-yogi, raja-yogi, hatha-yogi, etc. If one is fortunate enough to come to the point of bhakti-yoga, it is to be understood that he has surpassed all other yogas.”

1.7 Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge by systematically analyzing the concept of the Yoga Ladder within Indian philosophical systems, with a special emphasis on the Bhagavad Gita. By elucidating the hierarchical structure of different yoga practices—Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Astanga Yoga, and Bhakti Yoga—the research provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the progressive journey towards self-realization and union with the Supreme.

Contribution to Practice and Society

The findings of this study have practical implications for both practitioners and society at large. For yoga practitioners, the Yoga Ladder offers a structured path that can guide their spiritual practice, helping them to achieve higher states of consciousness and ultimately self-realization. For society, promoting the understanding and application of yoga can address contemporary issues related to stress, mental health, and overall well-being. By mitigating the threefold suffering classified as Adhyatmika, Adhibhautika, and Adhidaivika, yoga can contribute to a more harmonious and peaceful existence.

Future Research

Future research should explore the empirical effects of different yoga practices on mental and physical health, potentially validating the theoretical framework presented in this study. Additionally, interdisciplinary studies that integrate insights from psychology, neuroscience, and social sciences could further elucidate the mechanisms through which yoga facilitates personal and societal well-being. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term benefits of following the Yoga Ladder in diverse populations would also be valuable. Finally, comparative studies between the Yoga Ladder and other spiritual or psychological frameworks could provide deeper insights into the universal aspects of human well-being and self-realization.

In summary, this paper enhances the understanding of yoga's transformative potential and underscores its relevance in contemporary society, offering a structured approach for individuals and communities to achieve greater well-being and spiritual growth.

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