

# The Yogas



There are various types of **yoga**, also called different **margs**, (paths). There are three main margs: **karma-yoga**, the yoga of selfless action; **jnana-yoga**, the yoga of spiritual knowledge; and **bhakti-yoga**, the yoga of loving devotion. Some add a fourth path called **astanga-yoga**, the eight-step path, which includes physical exercises and culminates in meditation on God within the heart.

There are different opinions as to the merits of each. Some say that all are equally valid, like parallel paths. Others favour a particular process claiming that the various yogas are successive steps on the same path. Practically all Hindus agree that whichever process one chooses it must be followed strictly.

**Karma-yoga** begins with the understanding that certain selfish action will have a negative effect on the soul whereas fulfilling certain moral and religious duties will have a positive impact. This form of yoga involves sacrifice and acting selflessly to attain material necessities in this life and the next, without accruing any negative karma. On the highest level, karma-yoga means the unreserved dedication of all activities to serve the Supreme Lord. **Karma-yogis** prefer to think of Brahman as a personal god that exists in a heavenly realm. Karma-yogis therefore believe that moksha is when the soul leaves the physical universe and goes to live alongside the Supreme Lord in this heavenly realm.

Within modern Hinduism, **bhakti-yoga** remains the most popular path to follow in order to achieve moksha. It includes the external and symbolic worship of the **murti** and other practices such as pilgrimage. Like karma-yogis, **bhakti-yogis** prefer to think of Brahman as a personal god that exists in a heavenly realm. Bhakti-yogis also believe that moksha is when the soul leaves the physical universe and goes to live alongside the Supreme Lord in this heavenly realm.

Whereas karma-yoga usually involves bhakti and enjoying worldly pleasure, **jnana-yoga** promotes knowledge through seclusion, study, and self-denial. Activities and the necessities of life are minimised. Since the pursuit of wisdom and realisation is not simply an academic exercise, much emphasis is placed on becoming free from the sensual desires that delude the soul. **Jnana-yogis** usually aim at for the soul to re-join Brahman, which is how they understand moksha.

“Asta” means “eight” and “anga” means “part.” **Astanga-yoga** is a process of physical and mental exercises divided into eight distinct and essential stages. This is what most Westerners associate with the term yoga. **Astanga-yogis** spend a great deal of time engaged in a process of deep thought called meditation. The highest perfection is to focus on God within. Once this state of perfection is achieved moksha is possible at the end of this life but what this means is a source of much debate amongst astanga-yogis.