



## Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of yoga: An integrated path of spirituality, philosophy and human welfare

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### Abstract

Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of Yoga offers a holistic framework that amalgamates spirituality, philosophy, and human welfare into a unified approach for both individual and social advancement. Utilizing the underlying tenets of the Patanjali Yoga Sutras, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Upanishads, Vivekananda redefined the four principal yogic paths—Jnana (knowledge), Bhakti (devotion), Karma (activity), and Raja (meditation)—to align with contemporary societal requirements. He asserted that Yoga transcends ordinary physical or mystical practices, functioning as a dynamic spiritual discipline focused on self-realization and world service. Vivekananda, through his teachings and writings, emphasized the ethical and social aspects of Yoga, championing its capacity to eliminate ignorance, cultivate unity, and advance global harmony. This dissertation examines how Vivekananda's conception of Yoga surpasses sectarian divisions and provides a pragmatic, intellectual, and humanitarian framework for comprehensive living. By placing Yoga within the wider frameworks of metaphysical exploration, ethical advancement, and societal obligation, the research reinforces Swami Vivekananda's lasting impact on the global perception of Yoga as a transformational power for individuals and communities.

**Keywords:** Yoga, Swami Vivekananda, jnana yoga, bhakti yoga, karma yoga, raja yoga

### Introduction

Yoga is a very ancient word in Indian culture. However, nothing is known about the origin and origin of yoga. However, according to the ancient yogic scriptures, the god Mahadeva is the creator of this yoga. That is why the deity is worshipped as the ultimate symbol of yoga and Adi Yogi in Hinduism. "Shiva is not seen as a God in the yogic culture, but as the first yogi — the Adiyogi — the originator of Yoga."<sup>1</sup> It is not necessary to forget that Mahadeva was the first to be absorbed in the form of the Self in a meditative state. He took the path of Yoga to realize Himself as nature and the Absolute Truth.<sup>2</sup> Georg Feuerstein also said in his famous book entitled "The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy, and Practice" that, "Shiva is frequently revered as the first yogi who revealed the yogic path to humanity."<sup>3</sup>

Here's what the word 'yoga' means: The word 'Yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Yuj'. "The word 'yuj' means connection." "The Sanskrit root yuj has several meanings- 'to yoke,' 'to unite,' and 'to concentrate.' All are relevant in the context of yoga."<sup>4</sup> Thus, from the etymological point of view, yoga means union or samadhi. In the words of Yajnavalkya, the union of the jivatma and the Paramatma is called yoga.<sup>5</sup> Again, taking the word 'yuj' "to mean samadhi, Vyasa says, "Yogaḥ samādhīḥ" (in Yoga Sutra I.1) and Panini says, "Yuj samādhau" Samadhi is a part or stage of yoga and to rise to this stage is the ultimate goal of yoga. That is why the word 'Yoga' is also used in the sense of Samadhi. However, Maharshi Patanjali has said about the symptoms of yoga, "Yogash citta-vritti-nirodhah", (Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, Sutra I.2) that is, yoga refers to mindfulness. "The word 'yoga' does not have a literal meaning." According to Patanjali, this is the main meaning of the word 'Yoga', and the etymological meaning is secondary. In the Gita, Lord Krishna says, "Yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam" (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 50). That is, the technique or method of action is mastered. In this sense,

the method by which yoga is possible is called yoga. In the Tattva-Vaisharadi, the speaker mentions the double meaning of the word 'Yoga' - for its etymology and for its nature. However, he did not accept it on the basis of etymology but on the basis of instinct. In this sense, the word 'Yoga' denotes the duality of the known and the unknown. It is to be noted that the Yogarajopanishad recognises four types of yoga - Mantrayoga, Layayoga, Rajayoga and Hathayoga ('Mantrayogolayoshvaya Rajayogohatya Yogavaridha: Proto Yogivi: Tattvadarshivi:'). Among the four types of yoga recognized by Patanjali, Raja Yoga is included. This is the beginning of yoga.

### Materials and Methods

#### Materials

Primary Sources: The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (Volumes I-IX). Swami Vivekananda's lectures and writings on Yoga (e.g., Raja Yoga, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga). Letters, speeches, and interviews of Swami Vivekananda related to spiritual practice, philosophy, and service.

#### Secondary Sources

Scholarly articles and books analysing Vivekananda's interpretation of Yoga. Biographies of Swami Vivekananda. Commentaries on Indian philosophical traditions (Vedanta, Yoga Sutras, Bhagavad Gita). Comparative studies on modern interpretations of Yoga and spirituality.

#### Historical and Cultural Contexts

Writings on the socio-political and religious conditions of 19th-century India. Records of Vivekananda's influence on Indian reform movements and global spirituality

#### Methods

Qualitative Content Analysis: A close textual analysis of Swami Vivekananda's works was conducted to identify key

themes related to Yoga, spirituality, and human welfare. Emphasis was placed on understanding how the four paths of Yoga are presented and interconnected in his writings.

### Philosophical Hermeneutics

Hermeneutic methodology was employed to interpret the philosophical foundations of Vivekananda's teachings in light of Vedantic and Yogic traditions. Dialogues between classical texts (like the Upanishads and Gita) and Vivekananda's reinterpretations were analysed.

### Comparative Approach

The study compared Vivekananda's integrative model of Yoga with classical Yoga philosophies (e.g., Patanjali's system) and modern spiritual movements. Differences and similarities in conceptual focus, ethical concerns, and socio-spiritual goals were examined.

### Historical-Contextual Analysis

Vivekananda's Yoga philosophy was contextualized within colonial India's cultural renaissance and socio-religious reform. The relevance of his ideas to contemporary human welfare issues was explored.

This approach allows for a multidimensional understanding of Swami Vivekananda's Yoga philosophy—not just as a metaphysical or personal practice, but as a holistic system promoting individual enlightenment and collective well-being.

Now in the second half of the 19th century, where a bright voice breaking the social-religious inertia of colonial India is determined to pull the entire nation out of the inertia of self-destruction by chanting "Arise, awake."<sup>6</sup> He saw yoga not only as a means of meditation or salvation, but as a powerful social philosophy - an integral source of self-improvement and service to humanity. The voice of that idea was Narendranath Dutta of Simulia Palli. It is my unwavering belief that even in this century, India and the world will be guided by his style of thinking and philosophy of life. He placed Indian spiritual thought at the dialogue table with Western rationalism and human welfare, and presented Yoga as a fruitful philosophy of both individual emancipation and social welfare. Therefore, Swamiji-initiated Yoga is not just a personal meditation; it is a comprehensive philosophy of life, at the centre of which is self-realisation, deep tolerance and selfless service.

In this paper, my objective is to analyse first his four yogic theoretical frameworks, then spiritual and philosophical explanations, human welfare-oriented applications, and finally contemporary relevance. Etymology of the word, 'Yoga' and Vivekananda's journey "Yoga" is derived from Sanskrit and means union. In Patanjali 's Yoga Sutra this is the path of 'chittavritti nirodha', self-realization. In the Gita, the Upanishads, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, etc., the signs and methods of yoga have been discussed from different points of view - sometimes action, sometimes devotion, sometimes self-consciousness, and sometimes body-centered techniques.

Swamiji realized that the acceptance of Indian practice in the Western mind-set had to be increased - with brief, scientific commentaries. Therefore, he formulated yoga in the form of four elements - karma-yoga, bhakti-yoga, jnana-yoga and raja-yoga - which outline the four main tendencies of human nature (desire of action, devotion of heart, search of intellect, meditation of mind). This hierarchy is not new,

but Swamiji places it on two pillars - the moral structure of modern social service and the psychology of individual emancipation.

### Karmayoga

'Karma Yoga' is an important branch of Yoga philosophy, where action is taken as the path of worship. Swami Vivekananda, in his book Karmayoga, explains that action is service to God, and the means to self-development. It teaches not only to act dispassionately, but also to attain self-purification and oneness with the Supreme through action.<sup>7</sup>

### Self-sacrifice

According to Vivekananda, action becomes yoga only when it is done dispassionately. "Desire for fruit creates bondage in action." "Work, but never for results. "This thought is deeply connected with the disinterested action of the Gita. Whereas in the 47th verse of the second chapter of Srimadbhagavadgita, it is said, "*Karmanyabadhikaraste maa phaleshu kadachana*". (2.47) That is, your right is only in action, but never in consequence. It is said here that a yogi is one who does his duty without expecting any result. The way to true yoga is to give up the addiction to fruits. In the words of Thakur Sri Ramakrishna, just as one has to apply oil to the hands while plucking jackfruit, then the gum of jackfruit does not stick to the hands, in the same way one has to give up the hope of fruits while working.<sup>8</sup> Because it is from this expectation of the fruit that the pain of despair begins. This addiction is real. In Swamiji's view also, every man can build himself up by action, if he performs his duties unselfishly.

### Service and human welfare

An important aspect of Swami Vivekananda's work is - 'Serving man, is serving God'. In his words "He who sees Shiva in the poor, in the weak, and in the diseased, really worships Shiva."<sup>9</sup> He believed that God should be found in man, not in the temple. So serving the poor, the helpless, the illiterate, the downtrodden is the true religion. According to him, "The highest ideal is eternal and entire self-abnegation, where there is no 'I', but all is 'Thou'."<sup>10</sup> From this point of view, he led the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission, where education, health and social service were considered as part of spiritual practice.

### Self-improvement and ideals

Another aspect of Vivekananda's Karmayoga is self-development and personality formation. According to him, through action, man knows himself, understands his own strengths and limitations, and moves towards a better being. "Arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached."<sup>11</sup> This effort makes life constructive, meditative, and altruistic. Swami Vivekananda's Karmayoga is a profound philosophy of life, where spirituality is not separated from work life, rather work is the medium of spirituality. It teaches us that work is dharma, service is sadhana, and man is the embodiment of the Supreme.<sup>12</sup> His philosophy continues to inspire countless people to work selflessly for the welfare of society and humanity. Vivekananda's Karmayoga has opened a unique horizon of human life, where action, sacrifice and love are woven in the same thread.

### Bhakti Yoga

Now coming to Bhakti Yoga, the meaning and basic

concept of Bhakti Yoga is the path of self-realization through perfect love and complete surrender to God. "Bhakti Yoga is a real, genuine search after the Lord, a search beginning, continuing, and ending in love."<sup>13</sup> It is made up of the sense of "not me, but you."<sup>14</sup> Swami Vivekananda identified Bhakti Yoga as the path to realization of truth through an unbreakable bond between the individual soul and God Almighty. According to him, love is God, and God is love.<sup>15</sup> In the eighteenth chapter of the Srimadbhagavadgita it is also said in the five-fiftieth verse, that is, I can be properly known only through devotion. Knowing this way, the devotee enters me. Bhakti is the heart of Yoga. Where surrender is the main path. Lord Krishna says, "bhaktyā mām abhijānāti yāvān yaś cāsmi tattvataḥ, tato mām tattvato jñātvā viśate tad-anantaram"(Gita 18.55). He who loves Me knows Me truly. This love is unselfish and pure.

Swami Vivekananda speaks of two kinds of devotion - the *sakar* and the *nirakar*. According to Swamiji, "Some people are born to the path of devotion, and some to the path of knowledge. The path is immaterial so long as it leads to the same goal."<sup>16</sup> He said that many people imagine God in image or form, while some think in formless. He looked at both forms with reverence and said, "Whosoever likes which type of sadhana, he should approach God in that form only." In the eleventh verse of the second chapter of the Srimadbhagavadgita, the Lord says, as I have favoured those who worship me, so I have favoured those who follow my way in every way. In the words of Thakur Sri Ramakrishna, "joto mot toto poth,"<sup>17</sup> he believed that although there were differences of opinion, the purpose was one - that is to attain God. This speech is an example of religious tolerance, harmony and universal acceptance. However, according to Swamiji, this devotion should be with knowledge, not blind faith.

### Devotion and self-development

Swamiji's Bhakti Yoga is not just a matter of emotion; it is an intelligent spiritual practice. According to him, bhakti means absolute love—where there is no self-interest, no fear, or expectation of reward. It is this devotion that frees man from self-centeredness and connects him with the larger spirit, the universal consciousness.

Love is life. Swami Vivekananda had said many times, "The one who loves life, that one serves God."<sup>18</sup> According to him, God must be sought in man—especially among the afflicted, the poor, and the oppressed.<sup>19</sup> This thought gives bhakti-yoga a social form, where the love of God is expressed through human service rather than being confined to places of worship. Swami Vivekananda's spirit of Bhakti Yoga is not just a path of religious practice; it is a means of holistic human and spiritual development. Here, love, service, and surrender lead to union with God. He established bhakti not as a symbol of weakness but as a bold form of all-powerful love. His Bhakti Yoga still teaches people a unique lesson of spiritual liberation, service to humanity, and universal brotherhood. This devotion, which emanates from the heart, is the simplest and surest way to the Absolute Truth.

### Jnana Yoga

In his view, Jnana Yoga is the path that helps us overcome ignorance and reach the Absolute through self-realization. According to Swamiji, "The idea of Jnana is, that we are divine. The soul was never bound and will never be bound.

We are under the hallucination of bondage."<sup>20</sup> It is the path of spiritual practice in which, through reason, judgment, analysis, and experience, man comes to realize the true, conscious, and blissful Self. The Basics of Knowledge Jnana Yoga is a spiritual path based on Advaita Vedanta, which seeks answers to the fundamental question of "Who am I?"<sup>21</sup> Swami Vivekananda said, Knowledge is liberation because knowledge frees man from the bondage of illusion and teaches him to know the eternal Self. The basic premise of this path is that the soul and Brahman are one and the same, and God resides in the heart of man. That is why, in the 38th verse of the second chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, the Lord says, "nā hi jñānena sadṛśam pavitram iha vidyate" (2.38) there is nothing as holy as this man's wisdom.

According to Vivekananda, this world and individuality are a "maya," an illusion that conceals our true self. The only way to get rid of this illusion is knowledge. Ignorance limits us to the identity of "I am body," "I am mind," "I am name," etc. But in fact, the soul is eternal, indestructible, and infinite. The goal is to understand the nature of the soul.

### Logic and rationality

There is no place for superstition in knowledge. Swami Vivekananda emphasized reasoning, analysis, questioning, and personal experience. He gave a modern interpretation of the teachings of the Upanishads, saying that people should learn to think for themselves, to realize for themselves—not to depend on external rituals or customs. To know the truth, it is necessary to use the intellect, conscience, and meditation.

### Self-esteem and ideals

Yoga is not just a science; it is a spiritual practice. Swami Vivekananda said, "You are God, look within yourself." This belief installs confidence and self-esteem. Jnana Yoga stimulates the infinite energy hidden within man, awakens self-esteem, and shows man the path to ultimate liberation.

### Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of Jnana Yoga is deeply spiritual. He teaches us - liberation is not achieved by any external force, but by one's own knowledge and consciousness. His path of Jnana Yoga moulds people with confidence, intelligence, rationality and deep spirituality. For the modern man, who values reason and experience, Jnana Yoga is a timely and liberating path. It is in this way that one knows oneself, and realizes the Absolute.

### Rajyoga

The word 'Rajyoga' means 'the highway of Yoga.' It is essentially a system of disciplined practice based on the Yoga Sutras compiled by Patanjali, which indicates the path to self-knowledge through meditation, mindfulness, and control of consciousness. Swami Vivekananda describes Raja Yoga as a scientific method of self-exploration, capable of awakening the infinite power hidden within every human being.

### Self-control

The main goal of Raja Yoga is to control the movement of the mind and thought and to connect with the soul through concentrated and intimate consciousness. Swami Vivekananda said, "The one who knows how to control himself is the real king."<sup>22</sup> For this self-control, he

emphasizes the eight limbs of yoga or Ashtanga Yoga: Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi.

Swami Vivekananda did not see Rajyoga as merely a religious or esoteric practice. He described it as a tested and observable internal science. According to him, experience and self-realization are possible through meditation and the inward practice of Raja Yoga, just as external science proves the truth through experimentation. He therefore called upon Western society to embark on the path of self-knowledge through Raja Yoga.

### Self-awareness and self-development

Through Raja Yoga, one can increase one's thinking power, patience, concentration, and insight. Swami Vivekananda has repeatedly said, "Every soul is potentially divine."<sup>23</sup> Rajyoga leads to that—where man learns to realize his inner divinity. This realization makes him confident, courageous, and uplifted. Swami Vivekananda's Rajyoga philosophy gives a new perspective to modern man. It is not merely a spiritual practice but a method of acquiring deep mental discipline and intuition. His Rajayoga thought paves the way for liberation through self-examination, self-control, and self-view. In today's mechanical and anxious life, Raja Yoga is a reliable and scientific path that strengthens one's spiritual energy and helps one reach true self-realization.

**A Combination of Spirituality and Philosophy** The Bridge Between Indian and Western Psychology Vivekananda presented the essence of Advaita in the form of "Tat Tvam Asi" - You are all Brahman - in the context of Western imperialism and the Kantian noumenon phenomenon. He said that the mind creates the phenomenon of cognition; when the mind is stilled, the difference between forms and states of cognition disappears - this can be called an "altered state of consciousness" in modern psychology. Yoga is, therefore, an empirically proven science, based on insight but founded on universal principles.

The basic foundation of religion is unity in diversity; Swamiji gave the theoretical framework to Ramakrishna's words, "As many ways as there are." Since religions are different methods of searching for truth, the source of differences is mainly language, tradition, and historical experience; the destination is one. The four-way model of yoga is an integrated form of that pluralism, which strengthens anti-colonial India in self-esteem and inspires the West in the teaching of cooperation rather than religious competition.

### The Use of Yoga for Human Welfare

Education and character Swamiji believed that "human education should be such that it develops character, morality, and zeal simultaneously." "So in Ramakrishna Mission schools, yoga asanas, pranayama, moral stories, and social service—all are part of the curriculum. According to him, yoga makes students confident and principled by bringing them physical strength and mental clarity.

### The Relevance of Yoga in the Contemporary Crisis

#### Mental health and stress management

In today's world, work pressure, the information revolution, and physical inactivity combine to cause an epidemic of anxiety and depression. Raja Yoga-directed meditation pranayama, the practice of silence, has been clinically proven to reduce the stress hormone cortisol, increase

creativity, and maintain nervous endurance. Inter-religious tolerance and global ethics: in response to the violence in the name of religious conflict and nationalism, Vivekananda's syncretism says, "Respect each other's path even while remaining steadfast in one's faith, because in the end, all are on the path to Divinity." Sustainable development and service: not only personal salvation but also environmental awareness and social justice are part of the yogic consciousness. Karmayoga teaches that the earth is a great hermitage; without keeping its air, water, and soil healthy, self-development is incomplete. Thus, contemporary yoga monks are active in initiatives such as rural organic farming, tree plantation, health camps, etc.

### Critical Discussion

Critics say Swamiji's yoga philosophy is "romantic nationalism" — an over-reliance on religious traditions. Some have questioned how effective the Yoga-darshan's responsiveness is against the rigid structure of class and capitalist exploitation in society. In response to these apparent objections, followers argue that Swamiji did not limit emancipation to pacifying the mind of the sadhaka; he equated it with anti-poverty, anti-women empowerment, and anti-caste activities.

### Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda's concept of Yoga is both ancient and modern; its roots are in the Upanishads, its branches are in modern psychology, and its fruits are in service to humanity. He showed that yoga is not about counting breaths or lifting the feet onto the neck; rather, it is a holistic project to become a "jagat mitra." By uniting the four forces of self-view, love, intellect, and mindfulness, the individual is empowered, society is integrated, and universal truth is sung in tune with 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' - a family across Vasundhara. Such a universally accepted, scientifically verified, and ethically sound Yoga philosophy will show the way to mankind in the coming days to get rid of poverty, narrowness, and fatigue. Therefore, the Yoga thought introduced by Swami Vivekananda is not only a renaissance of the Indian spiritual tradition; it is a lighthouse for the world community, which shows that it is possible to illuminate the inner divinity of the individual through courage and service, and in that light, the entire humanity will be illuminated. Swami Vivekananda's Concept of Yoga: A Guide to Spirituality, Philosophy, and Human Welfare. So, we have to take an oath that we will not stop at just physical yoga practice, but will understand the underlying philosophy of yoga and apply it to life.

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