

Emblem of Holistic Spirituality

Holistic Approach to Life

'Holistic' is a term widely popular these days. Holistic medicine, holistic management, holistic education, a holistic approach..., the world seems possessed by holistic ways. Despite this emerging interest in holistic-ism, not many people understand the need to have a similar approach for leading a spiritual life. They speak of being meditative, at the cost of being active, or being devotional at the cost of being a seeker of knowledge. Somehow, they feel that only *either* could be true. 'How could one be a karma yogi *and* a bhakti yogi *and* a jnana yogi at the same time?,' they ask with a tinge of sarcasm and non-belief. It is all right, they seem to say, to have holistic medicine or holistic administration, but in matters spiritual, one should be exclusive. They feel every yoga should be followed to the exclusion of other yogas.

Though one's temperamental needs do make one particular yoga more suitable to oneself than others, spirituality cannot be an exclusive process. It is, and has to be, an all-inclusive, all-absorbing process. One can be devotional, but that does not prevent one from being a seeker of knowledge or from being an active worker simultaneously. In fact, there is an urgent need to understand how indivisible spiritual life is. You cannot live a spiritually vibrant life in pieces nor can one divide it.

Understanding Yoga

To understand this puzzle, let us first understand what yoga is. Definitely, performing

asanas cannot be called yoga, as much as dressing vegetables can be called cooking, though cooking includes dressing the vegetables. Doing *asanas* is only a part of the bigger term yoga. In fact, yoga is so broad a term that *asanas* form just a small part of it. Yoga means to join. This presumes separation. Yoga believes that we are divine, but somehow, somewhere, we have been separated from our divine core, and this separation is the cause of all our miseries, sufferings and limitations. Just as separation is the root cause of our present state of affairs, joining (Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, which means 'to join') with our divine heritage is the final solution to all our problems. Suppose a person having American nationality has been deprived of his national citizenship for some reason. Thus deprived, all his rights as of a natural citizen are forfeited. He can neither vote, nor own a house, nor travel freely, nor have any of the advantages of being a natural citizen. If, however, he regains his citizenship, everything—all rights and opportunities—come back to him unasked. So too, when we regain our true identity, all our right to divine qualities—to joy, contentment, strength, wisdom—in short, our eternal life, returns to us naturally. This is what yoga aims to do—to help us rejoin or regain our lost identity.

How does yoga propose to do it?

'This,' Swami Vivekananda answers, 'is attained by what we in India call yoga—union. To the worker, it is union between men and the whole of humanity; to the mystic, between his

lower and higher Self; to the lover, union between himself and the God of Love; and to the philosopher, it is the union of *all existence*.¹

Swami Vivekananda was a great spiritual visionary. He was the first great spiritual teacher in contemporary times to recognise and precisely state these four paths and also to harmonise them. He knew it is not sufficient to only state various approaches to spiritual summit, the goal of all yogas, but also, if possible, to present a combination of these approaches, and make it into a holistic approach—without compromising the need for a particular type or temperament. He kept this synthesis of approaches as the ideal approach to live a life of spirituality in today's world. He not only spoke of it, or wrote about it, but even himself took initiative to draw a symbol representing this ideal.

seal of the Ramakrishna Mission brought, showed it to Ranada Babu and asked his opinion on it. It depicted a lake in which a lotus blossomed, and there was a swan, and the whole was encircled by a serpent. Ranada Babu at first could not catch the significance of it and asked Swamiji to explain. Swamiji said, 'The wavy waters in the picture are symbolic of Karma; the lotus of Bhakti; and the rising-sun, of Jnana. The encircling serpent is indicative of Yoga and the awakened Kundalini Shakti, while the swan in the picture stands for the Paramatman (Supreme Self). Therefore the idea of the picture is that by the union of Karma, Jnana, Bhakti, and Yoga, the vision of the Paramatman is obtained.'²

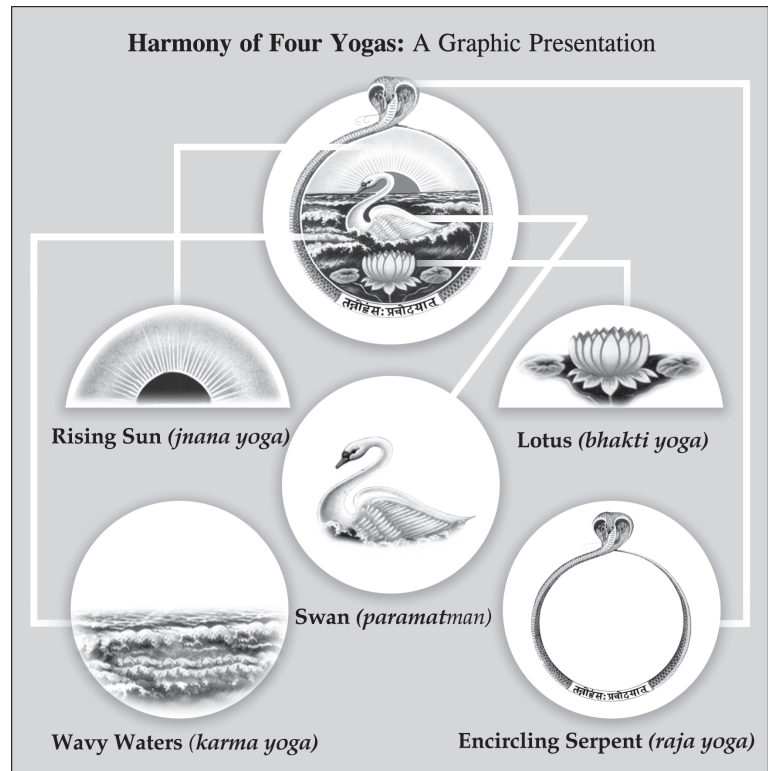
Thus Swami Vivekananda summarized the ideal of harmony of Yogas.

This graphic description of the grand synthesis is the official emblem of the Ramakrishna

The Emblem

Once, in 1901, Ranada Prasad Dasgupta, the founder and professor of Jubilee Art Academy, Calcutta, paid a visit to Swami Vivekananda at Belur Math. Ranada Babu, as he was popularly called, was an expert artist, well read in his field, and an admirer of Swamiji. During his visit, Swamiji discussed with him various topics related to art and architecture. In the course of their conversation, Swamiji showed him the sketch of the Emblem depicting this synthesis of yogas that he had in mind. An excerpt from the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*:

Then Swamiji had the design which he had sketched for the



Order. It is used in all publications, and official, legal and financial transactions of the Order.

Let us try to understand how different aspects of the emblem symbolically represent the four yogas.

1. Wavy Waters (*karma yoga*)

Swamiji points to the wavy waters as symbolic of Karma. Karma means activity. According to Sri Ramakrishna, the Ultimate Reality has two inseparable characteristics—static and dynamic. The same reality, which is static, when active, becomes dynamic. He said that these two sides of the Ultimate Reality are as inseparable as fire and its burning power.

Wavy waters represent the dynamic aspect of reality. Water is one of the five elements, which, according to Hindu cosmology, constitute the whole of the visible and invisible material world. Purusha Sukta says, 'From water came creation (*adbyah sambhutah*).' This idea of creation states that though One, the Ultimate Reality, decided to become many. From this was born Hiranyagarbha (*the Golden Womb*) and from that came all elements of nature including water.³

Like wavy water, this world of Karma is always in motion. It is ever-changing, ever taking new forms, creating fresh situations and perspectives. That is what this world is—a bundle of constant change. In Sanskrit, this ever changing world is often called *bhava-sagara*, the ocean of relative existence. A karma yogi learns to travel through this restlessness of change by remaining calm and detached. He is like the proverbial lotus leaf which never gets wet though it is in touch with water always. Sri Ramakrishna best describes the ideal of a karma yogi when he likens the human mind to a boat. He said that the boat can be *in* water, but the water should not be in the boat.

Karma Yoga is the art of remaining detached, unaffected by the results of action, good and bad. It is not running away but facing the challenges of life through skilful action. As Swami Vivekananda said, 'Do not fly away from the wheels of the world-machine, but stand inside it and learn the secret of work. Through proper work done inside, it is also possible to come out.'⁴

Water, thus, is a symbol of Karma Yoga.

2. Lotus (*bhakti yoga*)

Lotus represents heart. It is not the physical heart but the spiritual heart that the lotus represents. Mahanarayana Upanishad says, 'In the citadel of the body, there is the small sinless and pure lotus of the heart which is the residence of the Supreme.'⁵

The lotus also represents purity and non-attachment, and is a symbol of Bhakti or love for God. Most people let their love flow towards the world. But a devotee redirects his love only towards God, who resides in one's heart. Though God is present everywhere, it is in the heart, our spiritual centre, that he manifests most. The heart of the devotee is the 'Lord's drawing room.'

Loving God does not mean offering an elaborate ritualistic worship but offering one's love and heart to him. God is pleased not by what is given to him but *how* that is given to him. Narada calls Bhakti or love of God as its own greatest reward. Bhakti is not a means to an end, but an end in itself.

Lotus, thus, is a symbol of Bhakti Yoga.

3. Rising Sun (*jnana yoga*)

Knowledge is always compared to light. For, like light, knowledge reveals the truth. It removes the cover of ignorance. Traditionally, sun has been considered the God of knowledge or light. Millions of Hindus chant Gayatri

Mantra everyday, praying for knowledge and awakening of the higher intellect to the presiding deity of the sun (*savitri*). According to Swamiji, rising sun represents Jnana or the path to Jnana. Jnana yoga aims at removing the covering of ignorance that envelops the atman by purification of mind and negation of the very existence of ignorance. It is the path of 'not this, not this.'

Jnana yoga is not about gaining more and more knowledge about the objects of the senses, or to have more ideas contained in books, but it is a process of *dis*-covering the inherent Self. It is a search for the *subjective* knowledge, and ultimately, through that, discovering the underlying existential foundation of the whole world and even beyond. It is a journey of the alone to the Alone, which is of the nature of Existence-Knowledge-Bliss (*sat-chit-ananda*).

Rising Sun, thus, is a symbol of Jnana Yoga.

4. Encircling Serpent (*raja yoga*)

Serpent represents Kundalini. Kundalini actually means 'coiled up.' Hindu scriptures emphatically confirm the presence of a latent spiritual power present in everyone and call it Kundalini. In the physiological framework, Kundalini is supposed to lie at the base of the spinal column—the first and the lowest of the six chakras (centres) along the spinal column. When this kundalini power is asleep, as it were, one remains busy with eating, sleeping and procreating. For such a person, the world begins and ends only in attending to one's material needs. It is only when he begins to live a life of self denial, service, and prayer (i.e., when the higher life begins to appeal to him), the upward journey to higher centres commences.

A systematic approach to channelling and guiding of one's spiritual power has been expounded in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. The

basic principle of this yoga of mind control is to *dis*-identify us from the body-mind through meditation and concentration. This path is called the Royal Path, Raja Yoga, because it is the most direct approach to the science of spirituality.

Encircling Serpent, thus, is a symbol of Raja Yoga.

5. Swan (*paramatman*)

The swan is a symbol of the Ultimate Reality for more than one reason. Swan represents knowledge born of the discrimination between the Real and the unreal. This is based on the belief that if milk diluted with water is given to a swan, it sips only the milk, leaving the water behind. Water represents ignorance or the unreal. Milk symbolizes knowledge or the Real. Upanishads speak of Hamsa-Gayatri (*mantra in praise of hamsa or swan*), which is chanted during certain rituals.

*Om hamsa hamsaya vidhmahe paramahamsaya
dhimahi / Tanno hamsah prachodayat*

Om. May we know the Light of lights. For that, we meditate on the Supreme Light. May the Divine Light impel us towards it.

One of the interpretations of *hamsa* is Sun, representing Light and Knowledge. *Srimat Bhagavatam* (11.13:15-21) even mentions imparting of knowledge by God in the form of a *hamsa*.

Swami Vivekananda believed that by the combination of these four yogas (Karma, Bhakti, Jnana and Raja Yoga), the experience of the Supreme Reality (represented by Swan) can be had. Not only that. Realizing the Supreme Reality is the real, ultimate aim of human existence, too. Religion becomes fulfilled only when one experiences that Reality. Says Swamiji, 'If there is God, we must see Him; if there is a soul, we must perceive it . . .'⁶

A Poetic Analogy

The purpose of all Yogas is to know God. Difference in paths does not lead to difference in results. An eminent thinker and spiritual personality once likened these different approaches to God through a beautiful poetic analogy. What he said was this:

Let us presume this world to be Lord's sport (*leela*). God likes to play hide and seek with human beings. Though ever present, He has, as if, drawn a veil of *avidya* or ignorance upon Himself. Having thus hidden Himself behind this veil of Maya or *avidya*, God keeps the play going. This veil or screen is so charming, creating attractive images, fascinating scenes and pleasing temptations that human beings just busy themselves with the veil and forget the Lord behind the veil. Thus goes on this cycle of pain and pleasure, success and failure, competition and greed and so on. Just for the sake of scenes on the veil people undergo numerous hardships, disappointments and separations in life, without realising the Reality behind. 'The face of Truth is concealed by a golden vessel,' says Isha Upanishad.⁷ Truth or God (which is the highest generalisation of Truth ever possible) lies covered with a seeming reality. This is what the world is—seemingly real.

A time comes, however, when human beings wake up to the need to see behind the veil, to uncover the play of the Lord, and meet their lost beloved.

❖ When this search for God begins, some seekers visualise the presence of God not outside but as someone hiding within our own mind. The 'veil' after all is not outside but a covering upon the mind itself. Hence, they think, 'let us withdraw our mind and concentrate and meditate and try to seek to still the mind and see the hidden Reality, or God within.' Having thus 'found out', He reveals Himself to

them. These are the followers of Raja Yoga—meditation and concentration is their method.

❖ Some others, though they haven't actually experienced, start asserting, 'God is so very near, we have found Him out, we have found Him out.' Since in reality, there is no difference between man and God, and since these people deny all difference born of *avidya*, God reveals Himself out. They realise the thin, illusionary line that separates them from God who is their real Self anyway. These are the followers of Jnana Marga, or the path of Self-enquiry.

❖ There are others, who understand the presence of their beloved behind the veil but cannot see Him as yet, think, 'O! He is there behind the veil, watching us doing everything. Let us therefore work only to please Him, and not do anything for our own personal private glory.' Their all actions are meant for the Lord, and to such, He reveals. Free from attachment and greed, they work only for the good of others. These are the travellers on the path of Karma Yoga.

❖ Finally, there are Bhaktas, the devotees, who realize that, in fact, nothing can make God come out of His hiding. All struggles to realise Him are only methods to work out one's ego. Until *He* agrees to reveal, we cannot see Him. They, like children, cry their heart out, expressing their inability to find Him out. They beseech and pray and wait. Unable to bear their earnest entreaties, Lord steps out of the veil. This is the path of bhakti or pure devotion to God.

Synthesis of Jnana and Bhakti

In every case, it is an attempt to reach God. But of all these four approaches to Reality, Jnana and Bhakti are two major approaches, based as they are, on the concept of Reality.

Jnani says, I *am*—not the body or the mind—but the pure *IS*-ness. Bhakta says, I *am not*—only God *IS*. And according to our scriptures, there is no difference between the Atman and Paramatman. The difference is only in approach, not in the Goal. Says a popular saying:

ज्ञानस्य या पराकाष्ठा सैव भक्तिरिति स्मृता ।
भक्तेस्तु या पराकाष्ठा सैव ज्ञानं प्रकीर्तितम् ॥

'That which is the summit of Jnana, that is called Bhakti, and that which is the summit of Bhakti, that is called Jnana.'⁸

Swami Vivekananda, referring to those who dispute this Jnana-Bhakti-tangle, once said:

'There is no controversy between the Bhakta and the Jnani regarding the Sat (existence) aspect of Brahman. Only, the Jnanis lay greater stress on His aspect of Chit or knowledge, while the Bhaktas keep the aspect of Ananda or love more in view. But no sooner is the essence of Chit realised than the essence of Ananda is also realised. Because what is Chit is verily the same as Ananda.'⁹

From another perspective, this Jnana-Bhakti combination has been described as 'the path Yoga-Vedanta Synthesis.' Here Yoga stands for the various techniques in concentration and meditation, and Vedanta, for the lofty ideal of divine unity of all existence. Sri Ramakrishna himself spoke of the various aspects of this integral vision of the Reality and the ways to make a synthesis of different approaches to spiritual life.¹⁰

Conclusion

To sum up, the ideal of holistic approach to spiritual life is the need of the hour. Whatever be one's inclination or temperament, one should try to reach the harmony of the yogas of Jnana, Karma, Bhakti and Psychic control. Spiritual life, after all, concerns our whole life. It is spiritualising all our actions, emotions, thoughts and will which these yogas represent. Swami Vivekananda, indeed, was a prophet to have seen the need for this synthesis of yoga for living spiritual life in today's world of globalization. □



References

1. CW, 2:388
2. CW, 7:204
3. *Kathopanishad*, II.i.6
4. CW, 1:115
5. *Mahanarayana Upanishad*, Section 12.16
6. CW, 1:127
7. *Isha Upanishad*, 15
8. *Bhakti Yoga (Hindi)*, by Swami Akhandananda Saraswati, Sat Sahitya Prakashana Trust, 28/16 B.G.Kher Marg, Mumbai – 6. p. 262
9. CW, 5:385
10. *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* pp. 5-7

'The greatest force is derived from the power of thought. The finer the element, the more powerful it is. The silent power of thought influences people even at a distance, because mind is one as well as many. The universe is a cobweb; minds are spiders.'

—Swami Vivekananda, (CW, 8:225-226)