

Yoga and How to Get Started

By Stephen Knapp

The purpose of any true spiritual path is to raise our consciousness to the point of allowing us to directly perceive the spiritual dimension. Being spiritual means to recognize one's spiritual identity and practically see the transcendental essence of all others. It also means to see that we are all parts and parcels of God and to respect each other in that light. That is one of the goals of yoga. But how can we be convinced that there even is a God?

We need to understand that all things that are spiritual function on a higher plane of existence, one that is hardly perceptible by our mind, intelligence or senses. The spiritual dimension can only be detected when our consciousness reaches a higher level of awareness. It is similar to radio and television waves. These are not perceptible by our mind or senses. They remain invisible, yet they are all around us. In our base level of awareness, or unawareness, we may think that such things as radio waves and television frequencies are not real. Of course, we may be viewed as quite retarded by those who are familiar with their existence. So the thing is, even if you cannot perceive them, if you have a receiver that can detect or even utilize such subtle waves or frequencies, then you will know that radio and television waves are not only a fact, but can be used for many practical purposes.

The same thing goes for religion, or a genuine spiritual path. They are meant to bring our consciousness up to a higher level of awareness, to fine tune it so that we can receive or perceive the higher vibrations of the spiritual strata. As we practice a genuine spiritual tradition, then our consciousness can become refined and focused enough so we can receive the subtle frequencies and perceive the reality of the spiritual domain. Then we can have our own spiritual experiences. The point is that the more spiritual we become, the more we can perceive that which is spiritual. As we develop and grow in this way, the questions about spiritual life are no longer a mystery to solve, but become a reality to experience. It becomes a practical part of our lives. And how to reach that level of perception is supplied in the Vedic methodologies that have been preserved and handed to us by the previous sages who have also used them for their own development and spiritual experience. And that is what the Vedic system has been giving to humanity for thousands of years.

The Vedic system is practically non-denominational. It is not for any one culture or ethnic group. It is for all of humanity and is called *Sanatana-dharma*. *Sanatana-dharma* is both a path and a state of being. It means, essentially, the eternal nature of the soul, that which always exists. We are all spiritual beings within material bodies, so the goal is to regain that spiritual identity. This comes by a reawakening of our higher consciousness and the perception of our spiritual identity. It is through the process of yoga and the path of *Sanatana-dharma* that we can reach this higher awareness and perceive exactly who we are.

The *Yoga-sutras* of Patanjali comprise the essence of yoga practice. However, yoga itself is a deep and serious process, and there are a variety of forms of yoga that can be performed. There are four main types of yoga. There is:

Jnana-yoga, the path of intellectual development and understanding what is real and what is not.

Karma-yoga is the path of right action, detachment from the fruits of one=s labor, and dedicating our activities for a higher and spiritual purpose.

Astanga or Raja-yoga is the path of inward meditation and the attainment of higher states of consciousness through various practices.

Bhakti-yoga is the path of raising our consciousness, and developing our devotion and love for God and decreasing our attraction for the various aspects of the temporary material energy. There are additional forms of yoga, but they are often considered branches of these four paths.

However, in the preliminary stages, yoga is, essentially, for controlling the flickering nature of the mind, and for developing one=s finer qualities and expanding one=s consciousness from material to spiritual awareness. It is explained that Yoga is the process of completely calming the movements of the mind, which include perceived knowledge, misconception, imagination, sleep, and memory. When these are stabilized, then it can be called yoga which offers the opportunity for the seer to become established in his own essential and fundamental nature. Yoga is the attempt to realign our Selves with the Supreme Self, God.

When you progress in yoga you can feel the unwanted burdens of the mind fall away, such as anxiety, anger, greed, envy, hate, discontent, etc. Then other qualities like peacefulness, tranquility, contentment, and blissfulness will be felt. These are qualities everyone is trying to find and are some of the many things that can be accomplished with yoga, at least on the elementary level. As you make further progress, you may enter into the deeper levels of understanding and transcending the mind and gradually go so far as to attain realizations as to what your own spiritual identity is and what your relationship is with the Absolute. Becoming free from material life and regaining one=s spiritual identity is the goal of all yoga.

The Sanskrit root of the word *yoga* is *yuj*, which means to link or unite with the Supreme. And the word *religion*, which comes from the Latin word *religio*, means to bring back or bind to God. Thus, there is no difference between the goal of yoga and the goal of religion. So let us take a look at some of these forms of yoga.

By understanding what is involved with each discipline, you will know how practical they are and what is the goal of each process.

HATHA-YOGA

Hatha-yoga is one of the first types of yoga with which people become acquainted. However, it is not a separate system of yoga as many people seem to think. It is one of the eight steps of raja-yoga. Nonetheless, it can be used separately if only for helping keep the body and mind fit and in shape.

Hatha-yoga is described in such early texts as the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, the *Gheranda Samhita* and the *Shiva Samhita*. Lord Shiva is said to be the originator of the system found in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. This is highly regarded by the Nath tradition founded by Gorakshnath and his teacher Matyendranath, who was accepted to be a disciple of Lord Shiva.

In any case, hatha-yoga is one of the most popular forms of yoga, which can be done by anybody, regardless of how serious he or she may be about attaining higher levels of spiritual development. Although it is a part of a spiritual process, when taken as an isolated exercise technique it can be completely secular as well. Thus, it is practically non-denominational and non-sectarian. Anyone from any background can use it and acquire its benefits.

Hatha-yoga involves maneuvering the body through particular *asanas* or exercises, along with breathing techniques for controlling the life airs within the body. This is the *prana*, the universal energy that comes through the body. *Prana* is divided into certain bodily airs that function in different ways. *Prana* is the incoming and outgoing breath; *apana*, is the air which expels bodily waste; *vyana* assists in the power of physical movement; *samana* distributes nutrition through the body; and *udana* is the air in the *sushumna* channel. The main goal of hatha-yoga is to help keep the body in shape and free from disease, the mind peaceful and steady for spiritual pursuits, and the inner energy balanced and flowing.

This, however, is very useful in whatever spiritual process we pursue because if our body is too diseased, and if our mind is too restless and unsteady, they become a hindrance in our quest for spiritual awareness or perfection. Thus, with the practice of hatha-yoga, the body and mind become healthier and our spiritual practice can continue with fewer impediments to higher levels of realizations. Thus, it is beneficial regardless of what is one's spiritual discipline or even when there is no spiritual interest at all.

ASANAS

The Benefits of Yoga are various and numerous. On the mental level it strengthens concentration, determination, and builds a stronger character to sustain various tensions in the materialistic world. The various asanas also provide stronger health and keeps the ills such as diabetes, or high and low blood pressure away or in control. It improves physical strength, endurance and flexibility.

With the practice of pranayama and other asanas, the glands and muscles increase in capability and helps cure or prevent various diseases caused because of bad food habits and irregular lifestyle. Problems such as constipation, cardiovascular and respiratory difficulties are examples of this. Yoga also strengthens the heart and keeps the veins healthy. It improves the entire digestion process, making every part of the body healthy, light and active. Yogic exercises dissolve the fat, which makes the body light, healthy, fit and attractive.

A GOOD ASANA ROUTINE

For those just beginning and who want to learn an easy but thorough routine of asanas, the following is recommended for starters. Many additional asanas can be found in most yoga books. However, before we get started, there are a few rules to observe for precautions to get the most out of the practice.

1. Asanas should preferably be performed in the morning and with empty stomach. If doing it in the morning is not feasible, then they should be performed 5 to 6 hours after lunch in the evening.

2. Asanas should be practiced according to one's age, as well as physical and mental ability. Thus, one should do them as effectively as possible, but not overly push oneself into doing asanas that feel uncomfortable or stretch the body more than one is used to. You may have to work or practice various asanas until your body easily adjusts to doing them. Asanas should be given one's full attention and not done while watching TV or listening to the radio.

3. If you are feeling lethargic after doing Yogasanas consult an expert. Yoga should increase your energy levels and not decrease it unlike other physical exercises.

Rules for Performing Asanas:

1. Women should not practice yoga during their menstrual periods. Pregnant women should take care to practice moderately.
2. Initially you should take training from a teacher for the more complex asanas and pranayama.
3. If you suffer with any chronic disease ask your doctor before practicing asanas, or any other exercises for that matter.
4. Never extend yourself beyond your capabilities.
5. Do not perform fast actions. Yogasanas need to be performed slowly.
6. Perform asanas that stretch the same body parts in opposite directions preferably one after another. Thus if you perform one asana in which you bend backwards then also perform an asana in which you bend forward.
7. Asanas should be performed on a soft mat or blanket and on a firm surface. Do not perform Asanas on bare ground as being grounded in such a way can deplete or sap you of your energy. Specially avoid performing asanas on tiles and unclean surface mattresses.
8. Relax in between two asanas for 6 to 8 seconds. Take 2 or 3 normal breaths between them.
9. Food should not be consumed immediately after doing asanas. Have some light food after half an hour. Fried and spicy food should be avoided.
10. Avoid tea, coffee, carbonated drinks after asanas.

Starting with the Corpse (Shavasana) Pose

This is the relaxation technique that is performed at the start and at the end of each session. To do this you lay on your back, feet spread about 18 inches from your sides, arms at your sides palms up. Close your eyes and breathe deeply and slowly from the abdomen, and feel your abdomen rise and fall. Allow yourself to go deeper into relaxation and vacate the mind of all concerns. This reduces your body's energy loss, lowers your respiration and pulse rate, rest the whole system. Once you have relaxed for about five minutes or more, then rise and sit up for the next step.

Vajarasana

This is another often used asana as a sitting posture. Bend both the legs at the knees and place your feet under the hips, sitting on them. The ankles are under the buttocks while

protruding outward with the toes pointing inward. The big toes should be touching each other. The hands should be resting on the knees. The back, head and neck should be straight. This asana is good for concentration or meditation. It is one of the few that can be done after meals and is good for digestion, acidity or constipation problems. In normal practice, this asana can be held for about 3 minutes.

Assuming the Lotus Position (Padmasana)

Sit down in Dandasana (the normal sitting posture) and place the right leg on the left thigh and the left leg on the right thigh. (If you cannot do this properly, then just assume the normal sitting posture.) The spine should be straight. Keep the left hand below the right hand and place them on the lap (anjali). Focus the mind on the front portion of the nose, or focus on an image or deity of God or Goddess or any symbol that you prefer.

Chanting Om

Often we start a session with the chanting of Om. So while sitting in the Lotus position, first take a deep breath and then slowly begin chanting Om with a slow exhalation, starting with the mouth open and then closing the mouth and finishing the chant while humming through the nose. Do this three times. (There is a specific technique to chanting Om, which is more fully described in a separate ebook on my website, or at www.stephen-knapp.com/meditation.htm titled, *A Meditation: A Short Course to Higher Consciousness*. You will also find specific Pranayama techniques described there as well.)

Pranayama

Now we can do a short Pranayama technique. Inhale slowly, either through the mouth or the nose, and then exhale quickly deeply through the nose, letting the stomach area deflate as much as possible. Do this at least three times.

Next do fast inhaling and exhaling. Inhale quickly and deeply and then just as quickly exhale. Do this at least three times. This practice stimulates the respiratory system and creates warmth.

The Anuloma Viloma Breathing Technique

This is also a common technique but quite beneficial. This is for breathing through alternate nostrils. The left nostril is connected with the Ida nadi, the path of the Pingala nadi is the right nostril. Throughout the day, if you will notice, your breathing changes from one nostril to the other. Breathing through the right or solar nostril indicates the time for action, doing things. While breathing primarily through the left or lunar nostril indicates a time for thought or meditation. As previously mentioned, this change usually happens about every one hour and fifty minutes when we are healthy. However, most people experience disturbances in this pattern. So this technique helps restore a balanced flow.

When ready bring your right hand up to your nose and use the thumb and ring fingers. Fold

your index and middle fingers toward the palm. This is called the Vishnu Mudra. Then

1. Take a deep breath and exhale completely two times.
2. Then inhale and block your right nostril using your thumb.
3. Exhale a slow complete breath through the left nostril.
4. Inhale through the left nostril.
5. Hold your breath while closing both nostrils.
6. Close the left nostril with your ring and little fingers and breathe out a slow and complete breath through the right nostril.
7. Keep the left nostril closed and breathe in through the right nostril.
8. Hold both nostrils closed and retain the breath.
9. Now close the right nostril with the thumb and breathe out through the left nostril.
10. Now start again from # 2, and do this routine several times for one session.
11. Gradually, slow the breath to a 5 second inhalation and a 10 second exhalation.
12. End the session by bringing down your hand and inhaling through both nostrils.
13. Exhale completely.
14. Sit quietly, aware of the energy going through your system.

A variation on this technique is that all inhalations are through both nostrils, and exhalations are through alternating nostrils.

The Surya Namaskar, Salutation to the Sun

Next we stand up, and for those who can do this, this is one of the best series of exercises one can do. It is described in a step-by-step manner in a separate article on my website that you can access through www.stephen-knapp.com/surya_namaskar.htm, called ASurya Namaskar: A Great Exercise Routine@.

Leg Raises and Bends

A) Now while lying on your back, rise one leg upward to 30 degrees and hold it there for 20 to 30 seconds while inhaling, then lower it while exhaling and keeping the leg a few inches from the floor, and then raise it again. Do this several times. Then do the same with the other leg. Then do it with both legs together, raise them about 30 degrees and hold them there for 20 seconds. This is called Uttanapadasana.

B) Now we do the Pavan Muktasana (Single Wind Relieving). Take one leg and while exhaling, bend the leg at the knee and bring the knee as close to the chin as possible. Lock both the hands and keep them around the knee. Exhale and press the knee resting it on the chest. The nose should touch the knee. Remain in this position for about 10 to 30 seconds. Repeat this 2-4 times. Repeat with the other leg. One can do this with both the knees also (called Double Wind Relieving). Hold both legs and massage the back, which means to rock yourself a little by bending forward, backward, right-left. This asana gives benefits as per its name. It is extremely beneficial for gas related stomach problems. It is also beneficial with acidity, heart disease, gout and backache. It is beneficial for gynecological problems, mild menstruation, painful menstruation and uterus related diseases as well. It also reduces the fat on the stomach and increases the flexibility of the hips.

C) Now while lying down on the floor straight, bend the right leg at the knee and bring it

over the left leg to touch the floor near the left hip while keeping both hips as close to the floor as possible, and keeping the shoulders flat on the floor. Naturally there will be some twisting. Then bring the right leg back and do the same with the left leg, bending it and bringing it over the right leg and to the floor, and then back again. Do this at least three times.

These are great exercises for the back, waist and abdominal muscles. It is especially useful for back pain when done with lifting a single leg. It strengthens the intestines, cures constipation, gas and obesity. Also useful in heart and respiratory problems and stomach pain.

Two Wheels (Dwichakrikasana)

Lie down straight on your back with hands beside and below the hips. Raise one leg and bend it at the knee and rotate it like you are riding a bicycle. Repeat this from 10 to 30 seconds. Then do the same with the other leg. This then can be done simultaneously with both legs and in the opposite direction as well. Once finished, lower the legs and rest in the Shavasana or Corpse pose. Repeat this 5 to 10 times. This is a good asana for losing weight and to tone the middle area of the body. Helps cure constipation and other stomach problems. However, those with heart disease and backache should not do this with both legs at the same time.

Shoulder Stand (Sarvangasan)

Lie down straight on your back. The legs should be together. Place the hands at the sides and rest the palms on the ground. Inhale and raise the legs slowly to 90 degrees upward. If needed support the back while lifting the legs. Keep the legs as straight as you can. Take the legs back at 120 degrees and bring your hands up to rest the hands at the back, giving support to your back. The elbows should be on the ground with the paws straightened and the eyes glancing at the toes or closed. In the beginning do this asana only for less than minute and then slowly increase the time.

Then keep the legs straight and bend backwards slightly so they are now pointing straight up. Remain there for a few seconds, and if you can, remove both the hands from the back and rest them straight on the ground. Now press the floor with the palms and lower your legs so that you return to the same position as when you had lied down, first lowering your back and then the legs so that they are again laying straight on the floor. The duration for Sarvangasan and Shavasana (Corpse pose) should be the same.

This asana activates the thyroid and pituitary glands. It reduces obesity, weakness, tiredness and increases height. It strengthens the adrenal glands, semen glands and ovaries. It is also beneficial for initial stages of asthma. The diaphragm gets toned due to participation in the inhale and exhale process. However, those with cervical-spondylosis, hypertension and spinal problems should be cautious with this asana.

The Plough (Halasana)

Lie down straight on your back with your palms down on either side of your hips. Inhale and slowly lift the legs up together up, and then the hips. Lift your hands and support your back at the hips as you raise the legs, similar to the shoulder stand, but keep going until your legs go over your head and your feet touch the floor. If you cannot let your feet go all the way to the floor,

then do the best you can and breath deeply in this position. If your feet can go back to the floor, keep your legs straight, and let your hands and arms descend back to the floor, clasp your hands together and stretching your arms out behind your back. Stay in this position for 30 seconds. When ending, follow the same steps as used while going up in reverse order.

This asana helps make the spine and the back muscles healthy and flexible. It also activates the thyroid glands and reduces obesity and stunted growth. It benefits indigestion, dysentery, gas, constipation and heart diseases. It can also help with painful menstruation and gynecological problems. However, people suffering from enlarged liver or spleen should avoid this asana. Patients of high blood pressure, cervical and spinal problems should also not do this asana.

The Bridge (Setubandh Asana)

While lying down straight, bend both legs at the knees and raise the hip area while keeping your feet on the floor. Then raise both hands to the lower back area to support and lift the back, bending the arms at the elbows. Then raise your hips as high as you can while still keeping your feet on the floor. Then straighten the legs with hips still off the floor, while keeping the shoulders and head on the ground in a relaxed state. Remain in this position for 5 to 10 seconds. Then slowly lower the waist back to the floor while offering descending support from your hands. Rest and then repeat for 5 to 10 times. This will benefit the back, which is the pathway for much of our nervous system.

The Fish (Matsyasana)

There a few ways you can start this asana, either from lying down or from the sitting (Padmasana) posture. If in the Padmasana, keep your knees in the sitting position and simply bend backwards at the waist with the help of both hands on your back while resting the elbows on the ground. Bend the neck backwards as much as you can. The back and chest should be above the ground. Make sure that the knees are on the floor. Then while the head is arched backward and resting on the floor, bring your hands to the feet and hold the toes while the elbows rest on the floor. Inhale and stop the breath for a few seconds. To end it, merely straighten the legs and let the torso relax and rest on the floor and relax in the corpse position.

If starting this position while lying down with your legs straight and feet together, put your hands under the back of your thighs with palms down. Then press down on your elbows, inhale and arch your back and neck while resting the back of your head on the floor. Breathe deeply and keep your legs and torso relaxed. To end it, lift your head and relax your torso and release your arms, letting yourself relax again in the corpse position.

This position helps activate the intestines and cures constipation. It also makes the thyroid and adrenal glands act properly. It's also good for respiratory or lung problems or diseases.

Forward Bend (Paschimothanasana)

From a lying position, keep your arms straight behind you, or over your head, inhale and bring yourself up to a sitting position so that you are sitting on the pelvic bone. Keep your toes pointing upward and stretch your arms above your head. Now exhale and pull the abdomen in, and bend forward while keeping your back straight. Bring your chin toward your shins and your

chest toward your thighs. (If you arch your back as in bringing the head toward your knees can cause curvature of the spine.) Continue until you are bent all the way forward without your legs bending. You can then hold onto your toes, or whatever part of your legs you can reach, or your arms and hands can go past your feet while your elbows rest on the floor. Hold the pose for several seconds and then inhale while you come out of the pose back to the lying position. This asana invigorates the internal organs and the nervous system, while reducing fat. This asana is more difficult than it may seem.

The Cobra (Bhujangasana)

For this asana first lie down on your stomach, keeping the legs straight and together. Bend your arms at the elbows and keep the palms on the ground near the shoulders. Then inhale and begin lifting the shoulders and chest upward from the stomach, keeping the navel on the ground. Try to do this as much as possible without using your hands for support. If necessary use your hands to push the body up higher. Arch the head back as far as possible. Remain in this position for about 30 seconds and exhale as you bring your body back down. Repeat 3 to 6 times. This benefits any slip disc, cervical, and almost all spine related problems.

Shalabhasana

This is another leg lift, but while laying on your stomach. Lie down on the stomach and place both hands under the thighs. Keep the chin on the ground and while inhaling, lift the right leg without bending the knee. Maintain this position for 10 to 30 seconds. Repeat this 5 times and then do the same with the other leg. Then do this with both legs simultaneously. This is good for helping strengthen the back to relieve lower back pain.

Half Spinal Twist (Ardha Matsyendrasana)

This pose does not merely bend the spine but twists it. Kneel down with your legs together, resting on your heels. Then move your buttocks to the right so you are sitting to the right of your feet. Then lift your left leg over your right, placing the foot against the outside of your right knee. Bring your right heel close to your buttocks while keeping the spine erect. Now stretch your arms out straight to the left and right from your shoulders and keep them level with your shoulders, and then twist your arms and torso to the left. Now bring your right arm down on the outside of the left knee and hold the left foot in the right hand, placing your left hand on the floor behind you. Exhaling, twist as far as possible to the left while looking over the left shoulder. Then return to the sitting posture and do the maneuver starting with the other leg.

Ardhachandrasana

This also starts from the sitting posture in Vajrasana. So bend your knees and sit on your ankles. Keep both the hands on the chest. Inhale and then bend the head and neck backwards from the stomach. Support yourself with your legs behind you. The waist is lifted and stretched up. If possible, keep bending backwards until you can rest your head on the floor near your ankles, or even on your ankles if you can bend that easily. This is then called Puma Chankrasana.

This asana is very good for the respiratory system because of intense stretching to the lungs. It also cures cervical, spondylitis, and sciatica and other spinal problems. Plus it is good for thyroid when you can reach the Puma Chandrasana. However, people with hernia and severe hypertension should not strain themselves in this asana.

Returning to the Lotus Position (Padmasana)

Sit down in Dandasana (the normal sitting posture) and place the right leg on the left thigh and the left leg on the right thigh. (If you cannot do this properly, then just assume the normal sitting posture.) The spine should be straight. Keep the left hand below the right hand and place them on the lap (anjali). Focus the mind on the front portion of the nose or any one place such as an image or deity of God or Goddess or any symbol that you prefer.

Ending with the Corpse (Shavasana) Pose

Again you lay on your back, feet spread about 18 inches from your sides, palms up. Close your eyes and breathe deeply and slowly from the abdomen, and feel your abdomen rise and fall. Allow yourself to go deeper into relaxation. This reduces your body's energy loss, lowers your respiration and pulse rate, rest the whole system. Once you have relaxed for about five minutes or more, then rise and sit up for the next step. After a yoga session, it is easy to fall asleep in this position, but do not let yourself do that.

Meditation

For some people, ending the hatha-yoga routine is only preparation for the final step of the session, which is meditation. Now that the body is relaxed and in good shape, and all of the energy channels have been opened, now it is time to sit in the lotus position again and with deep breathing quietly engage in deep meditation. One can end the session by chanting Om again, but with more concentration and a deeper affect. Or one can enter into more inward forms of reflection and introspection for realization. After 20 to 30 minutes of meditation, only then do some people consider their yoga session complete. (Again you will find more instructions and insights on meditation in the ebook titled, *Meditation: A Short Course to Higher Consciousness* at www.stephen-knapp.com/meditation.htm.)

There are many more asanas that a person can learn. However, the more complex or difficult they are, the more you may need to be guided by a qualified yoga teacher so you can learn how to do them properly. Nonetheless, all the asanas that you do are only meant to help you reach a higher consciousness in which you can attain a perception of the spiritual dimension, up to and including the Divine Reality or Supreme Being. Many are the sages who have glimpsed this reality, and some are those who have actually entered into it and live in it every moment of their lives. They are the examples we need to follow, and asanas alone are not enough to take us to that level of understanding. There is more to yoga than merely keeping the body and mind in good shape, but it certainly helps.

KARMA-YOGA

Besides exercises to keep the flow of energy within the body balanced and smooth for the ease of reaching a higher consciousness, there must also be philosophy and awareness applied to everyday actions. Karma-yoga is another system that many westerners often talk about. This is for attaining perfection through right action, which is something that this world could use more of. This sort of action is based on religious texts for one's purification and future happiness, such as entering heaven after death. These activities may include ritualistic worship of the demigods, as well as a variety of other things, such as avoiding the causing of any harm to all other living beings, and doing activities for the good of others who may be less fortunate, such as digging wells, giving food, building shelters, or doing other humanitarian work, etc.

The main interest of one practicing karma-yoga is for accumulating pious credit for oneself and in achieving good future results rather than transcendence. In other words, this path is for one who is still attached to materialistic fruitive activities. A karma-yogi works for acquiring good karma for himself so that he can get a better future. But in the higher forms of karma-yoga, the results of whatever a person does are meant to be offered to God as regulated by the rules in the Vedic literature. When one gives the fruits of his work to God, then the work becomes yoga or linked to the Supreme, which makes such actions free of all karma. Without dovetailing one's work for God in this way, all activities that are performed for one's own interest or development simply cause one to accumulate more karma, not to be free of it.

So karma-yoga is meant to be a means to work in the world but in a way that can rid oneself of all karma and establish a strong connection with God. Then work becomes yoga. By giving the results to God, one becomes freed from the reactions of such work and also begins to make advancement on the path of yoga. Karma-yoga is considered to be the transitional stage between material and spiritual life. Nonetheless, one's karma (as I have explained in my books *The Secret Teachings of the Vedas* and *Reincarnation and Karma: How They Really Affect Us*) should be a concern for everyone.

JNANA-YOGA

Jnana-yoga is the path to enlightenment through the process of mental speculation and the study and acquirement of empirical knowledge. On a deeper level, *jnana* (pronounced *gyana*) or jnana-yoga is the process of discriminating between truth and non-truth, or reality and *maya*, and understanding what is the Divine. This is the knowledge of the soul and God, and the relationship between them. Therefore, the acquirement of *jnana* or spiritual knowledge is one of the first steps in spiritual development.

The aspirant of jnana-yoga engages in long hours of study and discussion in the attempt to understand the highest truth. One following this path must also accept the authority of the great sages and study in their association. Without proper guidance along this path one can easily become confused about what is actually the Absolute Truth. By merely involving the cognitive intellect, which is the main activity of the jnana-yogi, one simply remains on the mental or intellectual platform. Therefore, it is very difficult for the jnana-yogi to rise above material existence and enter the spiritual realm. The reason for this is that knowledge alone does not purify the consciousness, although it can help one understand the proper path to be taken. One

should not forever remain a seeker of truth, but should reach a stage of following the path that will give one realization of what the Absolute Truth is and enable him to reach the spiritual strata. This is the level of *vijnana* or practical and realized knowledge. The spiritual strata should not always be a mystery to solve or a quest to reach but a truth to perceive and experience.

However, in jnana-yoga much of what we find today is *advaita-jnana*, the knowledge of the non-dual impersonal aspect of God wherein the idea is presented that the individual soul and God are the same, and that God is the impersonal Brahman.

The preliminary levels of *jnana* may be acquired from books, but it is generally accepted that a person must receive the deeper avenues of this knowledge from a genuine *jnani*, a realized teacher. When a student has attained the means of accessing this knowledge, he must continuously absorb his mind in the concepts that are presented until his mind and consciousness completely adopts it. This is a long process and generally takes many lifetimes. Even if a student tries to do this with utmost sincerity, the *advaita-jnani*'s conception of the Brahman is inconceivable and unimaginable. So it can be difficult to actually get a grasp as to what the soul's identity is in connection with the Brahman.

After following this path perfectly, the mind is expected to become purified until it can perceive the reflection of the soul, which is beyond all *mayic* or illusory forms of experience, and thus beyond all external limitations. This level of perception, wherein one can see the obvious difference between the temporary body and the eternal soul within, is the stage of pure goodness or the pure *sattvic* level. Such a perception of the soul is when the *jnani* is said to have attained the stage of Self-realization. This level of enlightenment, though still quite an accomplishment, is as far as this process can take one. Yet it has not taken one all the way to God or to understanding one's relationship with God. Knowledge and the perception of the soul removes the attachments of materialism and ignorance from the mind, however this is in preparation for what must come next to continue the process, if a practitioner gets this far. So, although he may be considered Self-realized in his perception of the soul, he is not yet thoroughly liberated from material existence, which means this path is not complete in itself. There is another level of yoga which must be added to it. Therefore, jnana-yoga is often combined with other forms of yoga, such as raja-yoga or bhakti-yoga.

YOGA

From this stage of *jnana*, or jnana-yoga, many practitioners add or continue with the deeper aspects of yoga, if they have not already started it. This yoga may be in the forms of astanga-yoga, raja-yoga, kriya-yoga, or something of this sort. Yoga is the process to calm the mind and, ultimately, to become free of all sensual input and dictates from the mind. In that state lies the doorway to the spiritual dimension. In other words, it is the process of obtaining a perfectly thoughtless level of awareness in the state of pure *sattva-guna*, or mode of goodness, in which one can enter *nirvikalpa samadhi*--the thought-free form of meditation.

In this way, it is said that *jnana* is the theory or knowledge while yoga is the practice. By putting this into perfect practice, one can enter what is called *kaivalya*, the understanding of the Brahman, the impersonal form of God. The ancient Vedic texts, such as the *Yoga Darshana*, the *Yoga Sutras*, *Bhagavad-gita*, and others, mention that in order to be successful in this path it normally takes many lifetimes of continued practice without falling down from the proper

standard, along with following all the rules correctly, such as the *yamas* and *niyamas*. Only then can one gradually reach the *kaivalya* position, the perception of becoming one with the Brahman, which is the final or perfectional stage of *advaita* or the impersonalist form of yoga.

The *Yogshikho Upanishad* (1.55) explains that to achieve *jnana* or yoga realization, it takes hundreds of lifetimes in the continual state of *samadhi* to attain complete liberation from material existence. This liberation refers to the process of merging into the Brahman effulgence. So it is an extremely rigid path in which one must be absolutely determined over many lifetimes. It is like a painstaking and manual process in which one rids himself of every last drop of many lifetimes of material conditioning that has accumulated in one's consciousness. Then a person has nothing left but an awareness of the Brahman and one's spiritual identity with it. After all material qualities, attachments and conceptions are dissolved in the mind, to the point where you could say there is no mind, and one is in full *samadhi* meditation, absorbed in the Brahman, one can then enter that region at the time of death. Some yogis become expert enough where they can leave their body at will. However, such a yogi who can become liberated has to rid himself of all desires for enjoyment or worldly pleasure, otherwise there can be no liberation on this path. Only one material desire means another birth on some level. Even if he can leave his body at will, eventually he will return to seek out that one desire.

Even a sense of pleasure from the yogic path itself, such as the soothing and pleasant feeling during meditation in the mode of goodness, must be eliminated. These are all obstructions or limitations and attachments on the soul, keeping one from attaining full freedom in the Brahman. This is why this process can seem rather dry after some time for many practitioners, who then may look for something else, or quit altogether. Unfortunately, there are those who are impatient and if they feel there is not the expected result, they become distracted or simply give up.

So, actual success in this type of yoga is the result of firm preparation that fully establishes one in the mode of goodness, the *sattva-guna*, and then raises one to *shuddha-sattva*, the level of pure goodness which is beyond the ordinary mode of goodness in material nature. So *shuddha-sattva* means the yogi has escaped all material limitations, all mental conceptions and attachments, but has still not reached the spiritual form of existence which is *sat-chit-ananda-vigraha*, the form of eternal knowledge and bliss in which one realizes God. He may think that he has realized God, but he has still only attained the outskirts of full God-realization, or the preliminary steps in the complete perception of the personal form of God in which one can attain a loving relationship with God. This level of realization is still out of reach even for one who has attained success in the impersonal yoga system. Such a yogi has only reached the *sat* or eternal level of being, without the remaining *chit* (eternal knowledge), *ananda* (the bliss of spiritual existence which comes from variegated spiritual activities) and *vigraha* (the attainment of one's spiritual form in connection with one's relationship with God).

After many lives of practice and when a yogi experiences the effects of the pure *sattvic* mind and attains *brahma-jnana* (knowledge of the Brahman) and perceives the Brahman, he may then be called a *jivanmukti*, a liberated soul, by those who honor him. If such a yogi can be absorbed in that *brahma-jnana* experience at the time of death, he can leave all material attachments and identification, allowing only the soul to enter a neutral state and merge into the Brahman to drift there indefinitely. Then he has achieved *moksha*, liberation from material existence. The soul then attains all the benefits of being in the Brahman, such as eternity and freedom from all material limitations, which itself is a lofty form of ecstatic bliss. But he is like a single particle amalgamated into a great white light and is hardly aware of his own individual existence. It is as

if he drifts in a state of perpetual, actionless, spiritual dormancy. Therefore, even though this may be the goal of many types of yoga which portray the Brahman as the ultimate form of the Absolute Truth, such a perfected yogi still has not attained the personal form of God, just as merging into the sun=s rays does not mean you have reached the sun planet. Without knowing about *bhakti* and spiritual activities in the form of devotional service, one is still obstructed from entering the spiritual kingdom of devotional activities to God. Thus, if the yogi ever has the slightest desire for engaging in activities again, there is only one place to go, and that is back into the material worlds. Since he has no knowledge or awareness of God=s spiritual form and the realm of spiritual activities, he cannot move upward but must return to the material manifestation. This means one thing: If you ever have the chance to learn about the process of devotional service, do not take it lightly.

RAJA-YOGA

From either hatha-yoga, karma-yoga or jnana-yoga, a person may go on to practice raja-yoga. Raja-yoga, sometimes called astanga-yoga, is the eightfold path leading to liberation. It is also called the royal (*raja*) way. It is one of the most popular systems of yoga today. The process involves calming all mental agitation, which gradually helps the meditator to fuse with the objects of meditation by supraconscious concentration. The process is divided into eight basic steps.

The first step is *yama*, the essential moral commandments. Patanjali defined the following yamas in the *Yoga Sutras* as follows: *Ahimsa* - non-violence. A yogi should avoid any type of violence through thoughts, speech and acts. *Asteya* - non-stealing. A yogi should never desire to steal and never desire to possess what others possess. *Satya* - truth. A yogi should always follow the principles of truth which is beneficial for all. *Brahmacharya* - following the eternal principle of Brahma. It also means celibacy and continence, which promotes one=s determination and singleness of purpose. A yogi should restrain from carnal activities. *Aparigraha* - abstinence from collecting material things. A yogi should not possess those things which are not necessary for living. Altogether this means to avoid violence, lying, stealing, greed, possessiveness, and a lack of celibacy.

The second step is *niyama* or preparation and discipline for self-realization. This involves austerity or undergoing physical hardships for a higher result, along with study of scriptural texts, purity of mind and body, contentment, and devoting all one=s activities to God. *Yama* means the things to avoid and *niyama* means the practice one must do. Together they help keep the yogi=s passions quiet and stilled, and keep him in harmony with nature. The *niyamas* include: *Shaucha* - purity of mind and body. A yogi should always keep his physical body as well as mind free and pure. This involves taking bath regularly to keep the body clean, and also to keep all deviating and impure thoughts away. *Santosa* - satisfaction or contentment. A yogi should be satisfied with whatever he gets within the dharmic (lawful) means. *Tapas* - practice of austerities. A yogi should be determined to endure pain, troubles and adversities that creep in the path in order to achieve his objective. *Swadhyaya* - self-study. This can be interpreted in two ways. The first meaning is the study of self, contemplating on the nature of self and trying to understand the principles of yoga on one=s own. According to the second meaning, a yogi should go through and study various principles of yoga again and again. He should research the scriptures such as

the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and other texts. Then there is *Ishwarapranidhana* - surrendering to God. A yogi should surrender his actions and thoughts to the Supreme Being, God. Such surrender is one of the highest principles of yoga.

The third step is *asana*, or posture for meditation, often used in *hatha-yoga* as previously explained. *Asanas* help steady the mind and promote health. *Asanas* are exercises, some simple and some quite advanced, that can be performed alone with minimal equipment, like a blanket, fresh air, and room to move around, preferably outdoors. Different *asanas* develop and affect different nerves, muscles, and organs of the body and keep the system strong, limber, and free from disease. Thus, the body becomes a fit instrument for spiritual development. Learning *asanas* can also help in other systems of yoga, too, and helps keep the body in a good, healthy condition. We have already explained a number of *asanas* that you can do.

The fourth step is *pranayama*, breath control for fixing the mind in concentration. *Prana* means life or energy, and also can mean spirit. *Ayama* indicates the length and retention of breath between inhalation and exhalation, and control of the *prana* within the body. Since it is considered that a person is born with a certain number of allotted breaths in a lifetime, the yogi learns breath control to strengthen the respiratory system, soothe the nerves and steady the mind for meditation, and prolong one's life. Simply by controlling one's breathing a person can steady the beating of his heart. When one's breathing is not smooth, the mind is also usually unsteady and easily agitated. So as one learns *pranayama*, the mind becomes equipoised and free from the pulling of the senses. It can also clean the *nadis* (subtle *pranic* channels) and open the *pranic* currents, as well as decrease the unwanted inner mental activity.

The fifth step is *pratyahara*, control of the senses and checking the mind's attraction to external objects. It is necessary to control the senses to advance in yoga, and in *pratyahara* the yogi analyzes the mind's attraction for external objects. By the use of his study and cultivated knowledge, he recognizes that sensual delights lead to one's destruction, and the path of sense control leads to his salvation. By intelligently adjusting his consciousness, the yogi gives up sensual desires in order to achieve the proper frame of mind and freedom from the modes of nature to pursue successfully the goal of yoga.

The sixth step is *dharana*, concentrating on the object of meditation. However, it is more than mere concentration. It is becoming so absorbed in one's focus on something that a person becomes oblivious to everything else. When the mind has been completely stilled by the previous steps, the yogi can totally concentrate on a single object of meditation. The seventh step is *dhyana*, when the mind is in a state of undisturbed flowing meditation. In this stage the mind takes on the characteristics of the object being meditated on, and the frequency of consciousness adjusts to that upon which the awareness is focused. So, if the yogi is merged in meditation and contemplation on the Supreme Brahman, the yogi can enter that level of reality and remain in that state of supreme bliss.

The eighth and final step is *samadhi*, in which, according to the eightfold path, the yogi becomes one with the Supreme, or fully engaged in thought of the Supreme. *Samadhi* means the absorption in the balanced, eternal awareness or knowledge. This is the state of Self-realization for the individual. It is when a person becomes free of ego, bodily identification, sense perception, mental activity, and all time and space. This allows for one's consciousness to achieve its natural state of nonduality. This is in reference to the way the mind interferes with our perception of things around us and, thus, rather than seeing everything as parts of the Divine energy of God, we see the world of names, forms, images, desires, goals, and temporary

illusions. In this state of being, we become absorbed in the finite and unaware or forgetful of the Infinite. This is what we want to avoid. So in rising above the influence of the mind and in perfecting our meditation and reaching the state of *samadhi*, we can attain the Infinite. In Kundalini-yoga, the state of *samadhi* is considered the union of the *kundalini* or *shakti*, the female energy, with Shiva, the universal male energy. This union takes place in the top *chakra*, the Sahasrara Chakra.

So in the state of *samadhi*, the knower and the known, the seer and the seen, the soul and the Supersoul, become one. Thus, the yogi loses all individuality and merges into the Supreme or in thoughts of the Supreme. This is the result of reaching perfection on this particular path of yoga and in the state of perfected meditation. (Much more information about how to meditate is supplied in my ebook *A Meditation: A Short Course to Higher Consciousness* which is located here on my website, or at: www.stephen-knapp.com/meditation.htm.)

We should point out, however, that the path to *samadhi* through this eightfold system is arduous. Each of the eight steps calls for its own rigorous discipline. As in any science, if you do not follow the procedure properly, you do not get the results. For example, the actual form of perfection in *pranayama*, the control of the ingoing and outgoing breaths that are the last interference in one's complete absorption of meditation, or *samadhi*, means that ultimately the yogi should reach the stage of stopping his breathing entirely. Just as it is said that in meditation the yogi should enter the gap between thoughts and extend it, therein finding the doorway to freedom beyond the mind, similarly the space between breaths is the same space between mental and physical distractions. This is the state of being one needs to reach for entering into deep meditation. The breath is considered the last obstacle or distraction. So one must overcome this. Only after this is accomplished can the yogi withdraw his senses and mind from all material and physical engagements. Then he can go on to the steps of *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana*, and possibly reach *samadhi*.

Yet, such practices of mechanically trying to completely subdue or control the mind and senses by long, difficult exercises in sitting, breathing, sense control, etc., are nearly impossible for anyone in this age of Kali-yuga. This is the age of constant quarrel, confusion and distractions of all kinds. Nonetheless, through such attempts the mind may indeed become tamer, quieter, and various minor insights are possible. But in this age the complete removal of our attachments and distractions through such a process is rarely successful. Besides, this yoga system required many years of meditation for genuine spiritual development. This was not something that was done for twenty minutes a day, but was practiced all day, day after day for years on end. And in these modern times we can see that most people are so restless and have so much on their mind that they find it difficult to sit completely still even for ten minutes. So it is not a process that is really expected to provide the means for total spiritual perfection in this age of Kali, which offers many forms of agitation and problems with which we must concern ourselves.

However, the practice of this form of yoga with the use of *pranayama* can still provide some preliminary benefits, depending on how deeply a person can enter into it. It can still show how best to still the mind so that real meditation can take place. The point is that in this sort of yoga, as established in the *Yoga-sutras* of Patanjali, the real goal is to become free from the dictations and disturbances of the mind. This can help us distance ourselves from the external drama in which we always find ourselves and the constant conversation that goes on in our mind. And once you are free of these kinds of mental distractions, real concentration and meditation can begin. It can also bring some peacefulness into our lives and insights into our real identity. It can

even lead to experiences in which we can perceive a higher state of consciousness. In that state of mind, whatever system we use to meditate on God can be more effective.

Once the mind has been brought to a suitable condition for meditation by performing this type of yoga, from this point, the goal of yogis may still differ. Some yogis meditate on God with the intent of merging into the body of God, or to become God or equal to God, as explained in the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali. This idea comes from a lack of knowledge of one's true spiritual identity as an eternal, individual servant of the Supreme with an eternal, spiritual relationship with the Lord that must simply be reawakened. Such a relationship is not awakened by attempting to merge into the body of God. That is only another way of disregarding or even trying to nullify this service relationship. Thus, to practice yoga with such a desire does not lead to the highest level of Self-realization.

An impersonal conception of the Absolute is most difficult to understand for the embodied souls because we are all persons and we naturally relate to each other and everything in a personal way. We have a personality, and God is known as the Supreme Personality, so there are relations. So whatever we imagine as the impersonal Brahman is so tinged with our personal tendencies and conceptions that it is immediately not the Brahman that we can imagine. So the question arises that if we are persons in this material level of reality, which the *Bhagavad-gita* says is a perverted reflection of the spiritual world, then why should we not be persons or individuals in spiritual reality? We will explain more on this soon.

Although many books are written about this form of yoga, the majority of books one may find do not discuss the above mentioned points and generally only describe the most elementary levels of yogic practices that must be done. Therefore, one may at first be encouraged to pursue this form of yoga and may experience some initial benefits, but the elementary stage is usually as far as one gets. Otherwise, many people who begin to practice it later give it up due to loss of interest, boredom, or being frustrated at not achieving whatever results they expect. In any case, if one wants to pursue this eightfold form of yoga to its goal, the *Bhagavad-gita* contains some important instructions by Lord Krishna Himself on how this yoga process is actually meant to be performed, as related next. Many parts of the following instructions, however, can be applied towards any kind of yoga.

INSTRUCTIONS ON RAJA-YOGA FROM BHAGAVAD-GITA

It is explained in the Sixth Chapter of *Bhagavad-gita* that a transcendentalist on this path of raja-yoga should be free from desires, live alone, control his mind, and always concentrate on the Supreme. He should remain in a secluded and sacred place. He should arrange a seat, neither too high nor too low, with kusa-grass on the ground, covered with a soft cloth and deerskin (which is used to help keep away snakes). Sitting on the seat the yogi should keep his body erect and stare at the tip of his nose (closing the eyes completely may lead to sleep), control the mind and senses, purify the heart, and subdue the mind to keep it unagitated and free from fear. Thus, completely free from sex life, the yogi should meditate on the Supreme as Paramatma, the Supersoul in the heart, and make Him the ultimate goal of life. By this process of controlling the body, mind, and activities, the mystic attains the spiritual strata by ending his material existence. Entering the spiritual atmosphere and achieving liberation is the ultimate level of success in this or any other form of yoga.

Furthermore, the yogi attains the goal of yoga after he becomes situated in Transcendence. This is possible only if he is temperate in his eating, sleeping, working, and recreation, and becomes devoid of all material desires. As steady as an unwavering lamp in a windless place, the yogi must meditate on the Supreme with his mind. This perfectional stage of yoga is *samadhi* or trance when the mind is free from all material engagement. The characteristic of this is that the yogi can see the self and experience boundless spiritual happiness through his transcendental senses. The yogi realizes the ultimate spiritual truth and feels nothing is greater than this. Even amidst the greatest difficulties the yogi does not give up his spiritual consciousness. Thus, he is never shaken from his position of freedom from material miseries. In this way, one should practice yoga with steady determination and abandon all varieties of material desires. Gradually, step by step, such a transcendentalist should intelligently practice yoga until he can enter the trance of thinking of nothing but the Supreme.

Although the above instructions can be used in any form of yoga or religion, the yogi on the path of *astanga* or *raja-yoga* is ultimately supposed to raise his life energy up through the different *chakras* and fix it between his eyebrows. Then in full devotion remember the Supreme Lord. The yogi must practice constant celibacy, chant *om* properly, and remain detached from all sensual thoughts. By performing such meditation for many years, even hundreds of years over the course of many lifetimes if necessary, the yogi would gradually purify and control the mind until he could quit his body at will without any mental agitation or physical disturbance.

Of course, in this age no one can practice this form of yoga for hundreds of years. Neither are there many who have the mental strength to meditate properly with a singularly focused mind for hours at a time. But thousands of years ago, when this form of yoga was meant to be practiced, people could do that and actually reach perfection. Thus, the yogi would quit his body when he was ready, and at the proper time. *Bhagavad-gita* (8.24) states that those who know the Supreme leave this world during the day, during the bright lunar fortnight, and during the six months when the sun travels to the north (summer).

In this way, the yogi who practices the *raja-yoga* system should be so powerful that he can control the time when he will leave his body. Or, if a proper time is present, he should be able to raise his life air to the top of the head and, while meditating on the Supreme in devotion, immediately quit his body and enter the spiritual world. However, *Bhagavad-gita* (8.25) states that those who leave this life during the night, the moonless fortnight, or in the six months of the southern course of the sun, or those who attain the lunar planet, again take birth in the material world. Therefore, if the yogi happened to leave his body at the improper time, or was thinking of life in the heavenly planets, or of achieving mystical perfections, then he would not enter the spiritual world, but would be transferred to the region of the universe upon which he was meditating. Or he would enter into the region where the facilities for his level of consciousness or material attachments or attractions could be supplied. On some of the higher material planets, in the heavenly region, the residents are born with all mystic abilities and can travel through space at will. The yogi may evolve through such higher planets lifetime after lifetime, but until the mind is pure and the consciousness spiritualized, he cannot enter into the spiritual region and will be confined to different dimensions of the material universe.

It is significant to note that Arjuna, having heard about this yoga system from Lord Krishna in *Bhagavad-gita* (6.33), at first rejected it as being too difficult. He said the system of yoga which has been described appears impractical and unendurable, for the mind is too restless and

unsteady. Later, Krishna went on to explain the process of bhakti-yoga, devotional service, as being much more practical and direct.

Five thousand years ago, when this conversation took place, Arjuna was a much more capable man than any of us are today. Even then he could not see how he could truly reach perfection through this process of raja-yoga. We are not stronger, nor do we have better mental faculty in this day and age to think we might be able to perform this type of yoga successfully. Therefore, only a very few may ever be found who can be completely successful at it, although many may try and reach basic levels of progress. Such levels of expertise may even be exhibited in the form of mystic powers and might look impressive at first, but these are not the end result. Of course, many people may be fooled by those who display mystic powers and think that such yogis are indeed great saints. Indeed, sometimes they are, but such mystic abilities are nothing more than by-products of one's austerities, and are not necessarily a sign of genuine spiritual consciousness or purification. Some yoga students, especially in the West, may be attracted by these mystic powers and engage in yoga in the hopes of attaining them. But the number of Westerners who have ever displayed such mystic abilities, which will be described next, is practically nil.

In any case, the point to remember is that these mystic powers are nothing more than added attractions that one may attain as they advance along the path of yoga. But it is advised that these mystic powers must be ignored or they will become obstacles in one's spiritual advancement. They are like toys or playthings that can cause one to be distracted from the real goal of yoga. Therefore, if a yogi or guru makes an open display of various mystic abilities in order to attract people and make disciples, this should be taken as a warning that he may only be a fraud, like a magician performing some tricks simply to get adoration and distinction. Such things have not taken one all the way to God.

MYSTIC POWERS

Mystic powers are, however, quite real. What these yogic powers are and what they do is described in *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (11.15.3-8). There the Supreme Personality, Sri Krishna, says that master yogis have established eighteen types of mystic perfection, eight of which are primary, having their shelter in Him, and ten secondary, appearing from the material mode of goodness. The eight primary powers consist of *anima*, making one's body very small; *mahima*, becoming very big; *laghima*, becoming as light as air; *prapti*, acquiring whatever one desires; *prakamya-siddhi*, experiencing any enjoyable thing; *isita-siddhi*, controlling aspects of material energy; *vasita-siddhi*, overcoming the modes of nature; and *kamavasayita-siddhi*, obtaining anything from anywhere.

The ten secondary mystic powers that arise from the material mode of goodness through yoga are freedom from hunger and thirst, the ability to see and hear things far away, to move with the speed of mind, to assume any form, to see the pastimes of the demigods, to attain whatever one is determined to do, to hold influence over others, to have power to know past and future, to be immune from heat and cold and other dualities, to know the thoughts of others, to be invincible, and to halt the influence of fire, sun, water, and poison.

Although these yogic powers may seem impressive, many of them have also been accomplished by the advancement of materialistic technology. For example, the *Yoga Sutras* of

Patanjali states that by controlling the nerve-currents that govern the lungs and upper body, the yogi can walk on water or thorns and similar objects. To reach this perfection, the yogi may have to struggle and meditate for twenty or thirty years. Or a common man may go to the boatman and pay a small fare to immediately cross the river. What is the advantage of practicing yoga for so many years simply to walk on water?

Similarly, from the *anima-siddhi* one can become so small he can enter into a stone or atom. But modern science has made tunnels through hills and mountains and have analyzed such small molecules as atoms, accomplishing similar results as the *anima-siddhi*. By scientific advancement we can also fly through the air, travel under water, or see and hear things from far away as on television or radio. Of course, there may be some things science cannot do, like the *laghima-siddhi*, which enables one to go to the sun planet by entering and then flowing into the rays of the sunshine. Or *prapti-siddhi*, which enables one to get anything by extending his hand and taking what he wants from anywhere. Although it may appear like he is magically producing the object, actually he is just taking it from someone else.

By the yogic power of *isita-siddhi* one can create or destroy an entire planet. This power is much stronger than the atomic bombs that can only blow up a small portion of this planet and never recreate it. The *prakamya* power allows one to perform wonderful acts within nature, while the *kamavasayita* power enables one to control nature. And there are many other forms of these mystic powers.

Summarily, these mystic powers are attained by being absorbed during meditation in the qualities of the different elements that give one the ability to acquire the natural powers within them. A yogi then attains control over them, which manifests as mystic powers.

Through these mystic perfections one can derive many kinds of material happiness, but such power is still material. They are not spiritual. Therefore, yogis who are absorbed in the use of these abilities or the happiness derived from such yogic powers cannot get free from the material creation. They may be able to perform so many wonderful miracles, but this is not the business of those who are actually spiritually advanced. Saints and sages who are pure in heart have no interest in displaying their mystical abilities, though they may have many. These yogic powers signify only a preliminary stage of spiritual advancement. Therefore, in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*s (3.51), it is advised that by giving up these powers the seed of evil is destroyed and liberation follows. There is a similar statement in *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (3.27.30) in which Sri Krishna states that a perfect yogi no longer considers using mystic powers, which then makes the yogi's progress towards Krishna unlimited and causes death to lose its influence over him.

From these descriptions we can begin to understand that yogic powers, or other supernatural abilities one may possess by other means, such as from witchcraft, Tantraism, etc., may be useful in some ways, but if we are too focused on them they become little more than another snare of the illusory energy, *maya*, to keep one bound up in the material world. And using such mystical powers is another way of lording over and trying to control material nature for one's own enjoyment. They can cause one to become proud and to lose sight of what we are meant to accomplish in this life.

Patanjali describes in his *Yoga Sutra*s (3.56) that perfection is attained only when the mind becomes as pure as the soul itself. In *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (3.27.28-29), Lord Kapiladeva (an incarnation of Lord Krishna) explains that His devotee actually becomes self-realized by His causeless mercy, and, when freed from all misgivings, steadily progresses towards his destined spiritual abode and never returns to material existence. That is the ultimate perfection one can

achieve. In this way, we can realize that if one continues on the path of the real yoga process, regardless of whether one attains various mystical powers or not, he will still reach the perfectional platform in which everything else is automatically achieved. This is described in *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (11.15.33-34) by Lord Krishna where He tells Uddhava that those who are expert in devotional service claim that these mystic abilities are useless and impediments on the path of the topmost yoga, by which one attains all the perfections of life directly from Krishna, including mystic powers. Not by any other means but devotional service can one attain the actual goal of yoga.

BHAKTI-YOGA

Bhakti or devotion, can also mean dedication, which is essential for any spiritual path. So you find *bhakti* in many forms of spiritual practice and yoga systems. However, bhakti-yoga, the process of simply developing loving devotional service to the Lord, is highly recommended in the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* as the ultimate end of understanding Vedanta. It is the prime avenue for developing one's loving relationship with the Lord. This is what especially paves the way for freeing oneself from the attractions and attachments to the temporary material world, and, thus, provides the means for genuine liberation from the repeated cycle of birth and death in this cosmic manifestation. Bhakti-yoga is a system that is highly recommended for this age and is generally practiced by the followers of Vedanta called Vaishnavas, or worshipers of Vishnu or Krishna. It is by far the easiest of all the yoga processes and has fewer requirements for the practitioners than any other process. Bhakti is the yoga that begins, continues, and ends with love and devotion to the Supreme. There is no stronger binding mechanism than love, and spiritual love is the natural sentiment that emanates from God and connects all living beings. Thus, it is said that attaining this sentiment of devotion to God holds the sum and substance of all other yoga processes and religions. This path is so powerful that even married people may practice it successfully, while in other systems of yoga it is expected that one should be celibate. There are no extreme austerities to undergo; yet, the results are sublime. It is a scientific method of expanding one's consciousness to perceptions of unlimited joy and inner peace. Bhakti-yoga brings complete fulfillment to those who seriously practice it, and gives realizations and a perception of one's real identity as a spiritual being, and what one's relationship is with the Absolute. It can be practiced anywhere at anytime.

In bhakti-yoga there is not much concern about the *chakras* and the practice for raising the life energy up the Sushumna *nadi* or freeing oneself of the subtle body, as we find in some yoga systems. The reason for this is explained in *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (3.25.33), which states that *bhakti*, devotional service, dissolves the subtle body of the living entity without separate effort, just as fire in the stomach digests all that we eat. In other words, being fixed in devotional service, which itself is a direct way of engaging in eternal spiritual activities, the yogi burns up the five coverings of the gross and subtle body, which includes the mind, as he becomes more and more spiritualized. Thus, there is no need to struggle in the separate endeavor of trying to open the various *chakras* within the subtle body or becoming free of it if the subtle body is automatically dissolved. The bhakti-yogi naturally becomes free from ignorance, attachment to the body, false egotism, and material consciousness, and can rapidly reach the spiritual platform. In this way, in the deeper levels of bhakti-yoga, when the subtle body begins to dissolve, there is

a decreasing amount of interference from the mind up to the point when there is complete unity between the spiritual dimension, in which the soul exists, and the loving devotional service to God that is performed by the body and consciousness. Thus, the body becomes spiritually surcharged as a vessel in which the soul serves God. Therein, whatever *anarthas* or faults and unnecessary attractions and distractions we have, or *samskaras* such as mental impressions or memories of both pleasant times and heartache that we may have experienced from previous relationships, all become dissolved by the overbearing ecstasy of our reawakened loving relationship with Krishna. It is like a slate wiped clean from all previous markings. In this way, a person becomes absorbed in pure consciousness and, thus, is said to become a pure devotee. This is confirmed in *Bhagavad-gita* (14.26) where it states that one who engages in full devotional service and does not fall down transcends the material modes and reaches Brahman, the spiritual strata.

So this process merely uncovers and releases the true loving potential of the soul. This inherent potential for full and unconditional love lies deep within all of us and is our ultimate motivation for all that we do. Motivated by our need to love and be loved, when that need is interpreted through the body it becomes perverted and mistaken for the need of bodily affection or sensual desire, lust. When freed from this bodily and mental influence, the true needs of the soul stand revealed. This is an impetus for spiritual love, beyond all bodily desires, a pure love for God and all that is His.

The way this works is that within our material body and senses are our spiritual senses, which are lying dormant. They have no spiritual engagement while covered by matter. Devotional service, and the ultimate goal of any other yoga or religious system, involves freeing our real senses from the confines of matter and material consciousness, and engaging them in direct spiritual activities to the Supreme. When the contamination of materialistic consciousness has been removed and the senses act in purified God consciousness, we then have reached our eternal sensory activities which are spiritual and in relation with our real identity as an eternal spiritual servant of the Supreme Spirit. Eternal spiritual activities means to engage in serving the Supreme, which is our natural occupation, while temporary material activities means to engage in the attempt to satisfy our dull mind and senses, which keeps us a prisoner within matter.

While the yogis of other processes are struggling hard to artificially control their mind and senses, the senses of the *bhakti-yogi* are automatically controlled and purified by engagement in devotional service. When the mind and consciousness are attracted to the Supreme Being through loving service, it becomes easy to remain in such concentration without any other regulations, austerities or mechanical processes.

One example of this from the Vedic literature is of Visvamitra. He was a great yogi, seriously practicing and performing many austerities. However, even though in meditation, simply by hearing the tinkling ankle bells of a beautiful woman walking nearby, named Menaka, he fell from his yogic trance and had sex with her. After many years of living with Menaka he realized the futility of his position. He angrily gave up married life and again took to his yogic practices. However, when Haridasa Thakura was tempted by a prostitute while engaged in bhakti-yoga and chanting the Hare Krishna *maha-mantra*, he did not fall down. In fact, while the woman waited for hours in hopes of having sex with Haridasa, she became purified by hearing his chanting. She then gave up her interest in sex and also took up bhakti-yoga. Therefore, by experiencing a higher taste, Haridasa Thakura was successful. This is the advantage of engaging in bhakti-yoga. This is confirmed in *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (3.25.43-44), which states that those yogis who have spiritual

knowledge and have renounced material interests engage in devotional service to the lotus feet of the Supreme Being for their eternal happiness. With their minds fixed in such devotional love and service, they are easily able to enter the spiritual kingdom. This is the only means for one to attain the final perfection of life.

Therefore, those yogis or mystics who engage in devotional yoga are considered first-class because, while living in this material universe, they engage in the same devotional activities that are going on within the Vaikuntha planets in the spiritual sky. Thus, they have already attained their natural transcendental position. There is no higher perfection than this.

Presently, in bhakti-yoga the Vaishnava sect is one of the three major divisions of Hinduism, the others being Shaivism and Shakta. Vaishnavas have four major sects: the Ramanujas founded by Ramanujacharya; the Madhvas founded by Madhvacharya; the Vallabhas founded by Vallabhacharya; and the Gaudiya *sampradaya*, founded by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, who is regarded as an incarnation of Krishna Himself. This is the path that is most clearly enunciated by Srila Vyasadeva within the teachings of the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, and is the process for the most complete level of God-realization and liberation that is indicated in all the essential Vedic texts.

THE GRACE OF GOD

Many of these forms of yoga and spiritual enlightenment that have been described, such as Raja-yoga, were especially meant for previous ages, such as Satya-yuga, Treta-yuga, or even Dvapara-yuga. However, the fact is that due to the limitations and lack of ability we have in this age of Kali-yuga to accurately facilitate most of the above mentioned processes, they are basically impossible to allow most people to reach the ultimate level of spiritual success in this age. They may provide preliminary improvements in a person's awareness, health, and so on. But this is not meant to be the main focus or conclusion of such paths. Thus, because it can grant the practitioner the full range of spiritual development, the path of bhakti is recommended for reaching spiritual success in this age of Kali-yuga. In this way, one should practice the path of bhakti-yoga, or at least add it to whatever other path one prefers.

The biggest problem with the above mentioned processes is that a person, basically, is on his or her own when practicing them. By that I mean they are like mechanical processes that are either performed perfectly by one's own strength, or they do not take you to the goal of that method. Of course, a person may have a guru and someone to guide him or her along that particular path. But it is explained in many places that you must have the help or the grace of God if you want to attain the kingdom of God or properly understand Him. But how can you attain help from a formless energy, a mystical force, or the Brahman which has no qualities, personality, or means of reciprocation? How can you attain personal assistance from God if you are convinced that God is formless and has no attributes to extend His help?

We have to understand that the Divine virtues like God's love, protection, concern, and His grace, all come from His personality. That is why it is advised in numerous texts, a few of which we are presenting here, that any spiritual practitioner, whether a *jnani*, a yogi, karma-yogi, kriya-yogi, etc., should accept protection from God. At least at the final stage of a person's development in yoga, one should seek the grace and protection of God for the ultimate liberation. And no path other than devotion to God, bhakti, can attract the reciprocation or grace of God so

easily. This is why no form of yoga or any spiritual path is complete without the practice of bhakti.

The path of yoga alone is not necessarily protected by the mercy of God. In many places Lord Krishna explains that He is easily attained through bhakti and His devotees are protected, even if they may accidentally fall from the proper standard. So you could say that all other forms of yoga are the means of preparation and purification for freeing oneself from materialistic influences, and for reaching the stage of *shuddha-sattva*, or pure goodness. On that stage a person can perceive his or her spiritual identity, beyond the container of the body. Yet this alone does not deliver one to the spiritual domain of *sat-chit-ananda-vigraha*, meaning the platform of eternal spiritual knowledge and bliss in activities that are in relation to spiritual form. So the above-mentioned paths are all steps of refinement after which one must include the path of bhakti or devotion to the Lord to complete the path.

The point is that you cannot enter the kingdom of God by some mechanical or systematic process alone. You may as well try to build a stairway to heaven. You may get so far and be thrilled at the preliminary results, but in the end you must come back down. You can only enter the kingdom of God by God's grace, which is attained by pleasing God. Then He will open the doors, so to speak, to bring you in. As Lord Krishna says, for His devotees He preserves what they have and provides what they lack. In this way, they are protected. No other process provides that.

The advantage of bhakti is explained as follows by Lord Krishna: "One who is thus transcendently situated at once realizes the Supreme Brahman. He never laments nor desires to have anything; he is equally disposed to every living entity. In that state he attains pure devotional service unto Me. One can understand the Supreme Personality as He is only by devotional service. And when one is in full consciousness of the Supreme Lord by such devotion, he can enter the kingdom of God." (Bg.18.54-55)

In this instruction we can understand that through ordinary yoga one can attain the realization of one's spiritual identity as a pure soul, *aham brahmasmi*. One may even perceive the Brahman. On that level one is eligible to begin the path of bhakti. Or one may start with bhakti and achieve these things as well. But it is only through bhakti which reveals God completely, or through which God reveals Himself to the pure devotee. This is how He can be understood. So through perfecting yoga and meditation, one begins to perceive the reflection of the soul, and one's real spiritual identity. Then through the perfection of bhakti, the affinity for God Himself is developed and can give one the higher taste of Divine Love, and thus break the shackles of whatever remains of one's material attachments. Then the person clearly perceives the soul's eternal connection with the Supreme.

So why is it that bhakti delivers one to God? It is because of the devotional love that is developed, the Divine Love that is exchanged between two living beings, namely the individual and the Supreme Lord. It is the reawakening of the real relationship between the soul and the Supreme Soul. This also naturally reveals the true characteristics and identity of the soul without the separate endeavors found in the other yoga processes, like *pranayama*, *asanas*, or *raja-yoga*, *astanga-yoga*, *kriya-yoga*, etc.

When done sincerely, all of the practices in bhakti-yoga are not only *sattvic* in nature, meaning in the mode of goodness, but more importantly they are purely transcendental to all material conditions, whether it be the chanting the Lord's names, doing Deity worship, studying the *Bhagavad-gita*, meditating on the Lord's form, etc. Such activities automatically engage the

soul in its natural, spiritual loving service to the Lord, which earns one the grace and protection of the Lord that other spiritual processes lack. As it is said: Do not try to see God but act in such a way that God will see you. Then He will reveal Himself to you. This is how the Infinite becomes submissive to the love of the finite *jiva* soul and reveals Himself. Then there is loving reciprocation between you and God. Thus the process of bhakti is also the result. Such loving activities in service to the Lord are also the type of activities that one finds in the spiritual Vaikuntha planets. So the process of bhakti-yoga is like a training to purify oneself and learn the nature of the spiritual world and the loving devotional activities that go on there. Thus, through such practice and spiritual perception, one can easily enter into the spiritual Vaikuntha worlds upon attaining liberation, or freedom from material bodily existence.

How can you tell Krishna is God? Because of this loving reciprocation, this ecstatic exchange in the deeper aspects of bhakti-yoga which far exceeds the typical feeling of awe, respect, reverence or veneration that one generally develops toward the Lord in other spiritual processes or religions. This loving exchange provides a bliss that far exceeds the feeling one gets merely from the perception of one's spiritual identity as the eternal soul, or even from merging in the Brahman, which may also be achieved by perfecting other yoga processes. Such bhakti becomes unconditional. In other words, you become happy not for yourself but for Krishna's happiness. Your endeavors are to make Him happy, to make both Radha and Krishna happy. That is bhakti. However, the more you are dedicated to the service of God in this way, the more ecstatic you become. This is the reciprocation. Once you have this higher taste for the ever-increasing, ever-new sweetness and love of serving Krishna, Radha and Govinda, then you will not want to do anything that cannot be connected with Krishna. Thus, within the path of bhakti, all of one's actions can be performed with devotion to God. Through this process, and in His causeless mercy and limitless love, care and protection, He remains with you to help you in your thoughts of Him. Then one's whole life is a means for one's spiritual upliftment.

Such acts of devotion are a way of absorbing one's attention and consciousness on the forms of Krishna and His pastimes. It is a meditation based on loving service. Devotion is a way of extending concentration and meditation from a short period of time in the day to a long duration, even 24 hours a day, through love for God. This love is a natural flow of attraction for the most lovable object. Thus we never miss a moment in which we cannot be thinking of God through natural love and attraction.

As this loving service increases, what may have begun as a duty to spiritual life becomes an attraction, a higher taste, which increases through purification to go on to become love and reciprocation. There is no motivation or emotion that is more effective than love to draw one's attention and focus towards someone or something, just as a boy is naturally attracted to a girl. Similarly, on the spiritual level there is nothing more natural than the soul's attraction to the Supreme Soul. This love and attraction, which lies dormant in any conditioned soul, only needs to be reawakened, which is the purpose of bhakti-yoga. (My book, *The Heart of Hinduism*, can act as a guide to help give advice and directions into the practice of bhakti-yoga.)

MANTRA-YOGA

Mantra-yoga is one of the oldest forms of yoga and an easy system for enlightenment. It is especially used along with bhakti-yoga, in which case many people chant the Hare Krishna

mantra. It is also recommended as the best means for focusing the mind on the Supreme in this age of Kali, so it is easily used with other forms of yoga and spiritual processes. The word *mantra* literally means to deliver (*tra*) the mind (*man*). The instrument used to accomplish this is the secret power of vibrations arranged in a particular formula, called a *mantra*. Different mantras have different purposes. Some are meant for bringing happiness, some fulfill material desires, some are used in the worship of various demigods, some simply focus and steady the mind, some help raise the life energy up through the *chakras*, while others are incantations for casting spells and so on. But mantras used for spiritual enlightenment release vital energy, strengthen the mind, and prepare the consciousness for perceiving higher realms of existence. By concentrating on the mantra, the mind associates with the energy within it and takes on the characteristics found within the sound vibration. The more powerful a mantra is, the more it can invoke the higher energies in the mind and consciousness. In this way, the mind can be purified by the spiritual vibrations within the mantra. One who chants a mantra generally repeats it a particular number of times each day while using a string of beads like a rosary. Mantra-yoga works quite well within the process of bhakti-yoga. Further descriptions of the benefits and procedures for practicing mantra-yoga are described in *The Heart of Hinduism*. More information can be found in my article called *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, What's so Special About Chanting Hare Krishna?* located at www.stephen-knapp.com/chanting_hare_krishna.htm.

OTHER FORMS OF YOGA

KUNDALINI-YOGA

Kundalini-yoga is a system in which those who practice it must understand a good deal about their body, subtle body, and the *chakras* and channels of energy within. One also must thoroughly understand the disciplines that help the yogi control his bodily functions and internal states. The term *kundalini* is hardly mentioned in any of the Vedic texts, and not at all in any of the *Upanishads*. However, the principles of it are related to the philosophy found therein. The system of *kundalini* is introduced in later texts. These include such primary yoga scriptures as the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* of Svamim, the *Gheranda Samhita*, and the *Shiva Samhita*. It is primarily described in the Tantric texts. So, it is generally practiced by those who are followers of the *Tantras*. Of course, there are many simple exercises within this system that anyone can do for benefitting their health or mental makeup. But herein we are talking about the means for taking this system all the way to the advanced level for complete spiritual unfoldment, which needs supervision.

Kundalini-yoga is a process similar to the raja-yoga or astanga-yoga systems in that one must sit in the proper place and posture, control the breathing, and discipline the mind and senses. With practice, the yogi tries to awaken the *kundalini*, the coiled one or primal force, which is compared to a tiny snake or spiral of fire-energy lying asleep and coiled three and a half times at the base of the spine. The yogi performs certain exercises and techniques to arouse the *kundalini* and raise it through the Sushumna channel to the highest *chakra* at the crown of the head, which is called the Sahasrara or lotus of a thousand petals. The *kundalini* is female, or Shakti, while the

Sahasrara is male, or Shiva. When the *kundalini* or Shakti energy unites with the universal Shiva force, the yogi is then considered to be united with the universal soul.

The word *kundalini* is derived from the Sanskrit *kundal*, which means a coil, as a coiled serpent. The movement of the *kundalini* energy is spiraling when awakened from its coiled state. The means by which the *kundalini* becomes awakened is the process which fuses the negative ions of the *prana* (life air) with the positive ions of the *apana* (the body's functional airs). This fusion occurs in the lower Muladhara Chakra after steady practice of purification consisting of yoga, such as hatha-yoga, laya-yoga, karma-yoga, mantras, *asanas*, meditation, etc. When awakened, this energy moves through the *nadi* channels, which are streams of subtle energy. Veins and arteries are also *nadis* but of gross physical energies. If it keeps rising, it can go all the way to the top of the head to the top *chakra*. The yogi then has a chance to attain the highest goal of this form of yoga. Once the *kundalini* is awakened, then, for the full goal to be achieved, the practitioner must continue working at raising the *kundalini* until it reaches the Sahasrara chakra. And then from the Sahasrara chakra it leaves the body. Otherwise the work remains unfinished, and the process incomplete.

The way this works is that as the *kundalini* energy ascends the spine through the Sushumna nerve, it pulls the yogi's life energy and soul up to the Sahasrara at the top of the head. The skull then fractures and the yogi leaves the material body and merges into the great white light. This is the ultimate goal of kundalini-yoga. Though there may be many who try the kundalini-yoga process and even make some progress on the path, few are those who can actually take it to the final goal.

The various experiences that a person sometimes has when the *kundalini* begins to awaken can be quite profound. When it is awakened, the body and mind can be vitalized. Mental transformations can take place, in some cases rapidly. Awareness begins to expand and intuitive powers increase. If it rises smoothly and high enough, superconscious states may manifest. However, if one is not spiritually mature to understand what is happening, confusion may result. This is why it is important to have the instructions of an experienced guru to assist with one's development along this path. Continued practice in spiritual activities and meditation will also help.

As the *kundalini* rises to the different *chakras*, one may have many physical sensations, such as feeling hot or cold in different parts of the body, or feeling light or heavy as the energy moves. A person may also have psychic experiences or acquire different mystic powers. A person may even have visions of other realms or view events of the future, or may mystically travel to the planets of hell or heaven or the subtle realms of existence that are described in the Vedic *Puranas*.

When the *kundalini* rises to the heart *chakra*, the heart and emotions open and one can be flooded with waves of great bliss. At the Ajna *chakra*, the mind becomes quiet and steady. As it rises towards the Sahasrara *chakra*, one can hear cosmic sounds described as the inner harmonies of the celestial spheres. These experiences can be caused by the energy within or from simply opening oneself to the subtle realm or astral plane beyond the physical dimension. One then quiets the mind thereby allowing for the destruction of ignorance and illusion, which is the cause of duality and identification with the finite. Reaching this non-dual consciousness, one is said to become enlightened, or at least enters a level of non-dual perception of that level of subtle reality. However, this does not mean a person is making the necessary spiritual progress to enter the transcendental atmosphere. The subtle realm has many levels, both high and low, or awesome

and horrible. Opening channels that allow us to experience these subtle energies does not mean we are in control of them. A person may have fantastic mystical experiences, or undergo nightmarish encounters, depending on the level of energy and consciousness with which one comes in contact. One may also encounter various entities from these subtle levels, both benevolent or intimidating. Once the channels to the lower levels of the subtle realm have been opened, through whatever means, harmful entities may come through and cause trouble in a number of ways. Of course, not many are those who reach this level of practice or need worry about such things. Other stages of kundalini-yoga are described in the next section on the *chakras*.

The ways through which the *kundalini* can be awakened include intense devotion to God, repetition of particular mantras, continued practice of *pranayama*, prayer, meditation, or by yogic exercises under the guidance of an empowered guru. It is also helpful when a person's health is in good condition, when one lives in a spiritually conducive environment, and when one is receptive to spiritual awakening. Rarely is it spontaneously aroused because of one's progress in past lives, but it can happen, which may create confusing experiences if the person does not understand what is taking place. The *kundalini* can also be aroused when the guru transmits his energy to the disciple through touch. This causes the disciple to have an awakening of superconsciousness, but only to the degree to which the guru is empowered.

This also happened with Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Bengal 500 years ago. Whoever came in contact with Him or heard His ecstatic chanting of the Hare Krishna *maha-mantra* would be imbibed with His potency and become immersed in ecstatic love of God. Some people relate this form of God-realization to the arousal of the *kundalini*, while others refer to it simply as being a reawakening of one's spiritual position. Even though Sri Chaitanya gave this powerful ecstasy to many people, He never put any emphasis on rousing the *kundalini*. He only taught that the goal is to reawaken one's spiritual love of God through the process of bhakti-yoga by absorbing oneself in the chanting of the *maha-mantra*, which can bring complete spiritual enlightenment and transform one's vision on every level.

To master the *kundalini* energy may take many years. One must also take instruction from a guru who is well experienced in this practice because the aspirant must know how to handle the *kundalini* force when it is awakened, otherwise negative reactions can take place. The flow of the *kundalini* has to be controlled or guided properly. If it flows downward, or up through the Ida or Pingala channels, serious health, mental or psychological problems will ensue. It can only flow up the Shushumna channel with smooth, steady progress to attain positive results. If the *kundalini* is not controlled properly once one is able to begin raising it, or if it is awakened forcibly by one who is improperly trained, it can be more than the person can handle. The *kundalini* may become active, but in an irritated manner. In such a case, it can cause serious damage, both physically and psychologically, up to the point of mental agitation, confusion, illusion, or even insanity. Thus, the practice of kundalini-yoga can be dangerous if one has not been thoroughly trained by an expert guru.

This does not happen often, but I have personally seen the damage this form of yoga can do if one does not know what he is doing. One boy who used to visit a yoga center I was staying at years ago also practiced kundalini-yoga. He started becoming good at awakening this force. He could raise it a little, but never learned what to do with it. At one point the force went up his spine and all the way to his brain. What exactly happened I cannot say, but it obviously affected him psychologically and damaged some of the nerves in his brain. From then on he acted very

peculiar, as if he was mentally retarded. Before that he was quite normal and enthusiastic and talkative. But afterwards, you could not even have a coherent conversation with him. He simply lost his ability to communicate well, even though he would try to. So a neophyte must not rush in and begin trying something for which he is not prepared.

You first have to ask yourself why you are engaging in yoga. Are you sincerely trying to attain spiritual enlightenment, or are you just trying to see some white light or hear some cosmic sounds? Are you actually longing for a purified consciousness, or do you simply want a little excitement, another cheap thrill? If all you want is some new sensation, then what is the difference in your pursuit of yoga and your sensual desires? Sex can produce a thrill, too, although very temporarily. But if such is the case, then the real goal of yoga is missed. Engaging in yoga for such purposes is like undergoing the struggle of digging a deep well in order to find water to satisfy your thirst while residing on the banks of a clear, fresh water lake. In other words, it will reward you with only shallow results after much work, while, on the other hand, attaining the real goal of yoga through the purification of your consciousness allows you to experience the bliss within, which is like an ocean of joy.

THE CHAKRAS AND KOSHAS

If you are interested in raja-yoga or kundalini-yoga, you must know the science of the *chakras* and *koshas*. Within the gross physical body there is the subtle or *sukshma* body, which is divided into layers. As *Bhagavad-gita* (3.42) explains, the working senses are superior to dull matter; mind is higher than the senses; intelligence is higher than the mind; and the soul is higher than the intelligence. This describes the way the body has layers or sheaths called *koshas* that cover the living entity and become decreasingly dense as one goes inward.

The physical body is called the *annamaya-kosha* that is made from food. Then there is the *pranamaya-kosha* made of the vital air circulating within the gross body. Deeper is the *manomaya-kosha*, or mind body, and then the *vijnanamaya-kosha*, or intelligence body. Finer than all these is the *anandamaya-kosha* wherein one attains bliss.

Within the subtle body are *chakras* that are the psychic centers of energy situated along the spinal column. Each of the *koshas* are connected with the different *chakras*. The *annamaya-kosha* is made up and connected with the elements of earth, water, and fire, which are centered respectively in the Muladhara *chakra* at the base of the spine, the Svadhithana *chakra* along the spine near the genitals, and the Manipura *chakra* at the level of the solar plexus. Composed of air and ether is the *pranamaya-kosha* that is centered in the Anahata *chakra* near the heart, and the Vishuddha *chakra* along the spine behind the throat. The *manomaya-kosha* and *vijnanamaya-kosha* are centered in the Ajna *chakra* situated between the eyebrows. And connected with the *anandamaya-kosha*, the Sahasrara *chakra*, or lotus of a thousand petals, is located just above the crown of the head.

These subtle sheaths have particular connections with the physical body at numerous points that are linked with many subtle energy channels known as *nadis* that flow through the whole body. (These points also correspond to acupuncture points.) The *Shiva Samhita* describes 14 major *nadis*. But the most important *nadi* is the Sushumna, the central channel that runs from just below the Muladhara *chakra* and extends up the spine to the forehead. On the left side of the Sushumna is the white lunar *nadi*, called Ida, and on the right side is the red solar *nadi* called

Pingala. The conjunction of the Sushumna, Ida and Pingala is called the Yukta Triveni. This is where the fusion of the *prana* and *apana* takes place to charge the *kundalini* upwards. When that happens, two currents of psychic energy flow through the Ida and Pingala *nadis* in opposite directions, spiraling around the Sushumna from the base of the spine and up to meet at the forehead at the Ajna *chakra*. Within the Sushumna are three more channels called Vajra, Chitrini and Brahmani. It is the Brahmani in which the *kundalini* travels upwards toward the Brahma-randhra, or Sahasrara *chakra*.

As one raises the life energy or *kundalini*, there will be a transformation of awareness from the physical to the subtle. This can be understood in the way each *chakra* corresponds with one of the elements. The Muladhara relates to earth or solidity, Svadhisthana with water or liquid, Manipura to gases or fire, Anahata with air, and Vishuddha with ether or space.

At the Ajna center, known as the third eye, the energy reaches the hollow space between the hemispheres of the brain known as the Bhramara Gupha (cave of the bumble bee) and the Andha Kup, known as the tenth gate of the body. The nine other gates are the two eyes, two nostrils, two ears, the mouth, and genitals and anus. The tenth gate opens only when one has reached perfection in this kind of yoga. The tenth gate is the soft spot on top of the skull, especially noticed in babies before it is developed and becomes hard. By the practice of this form of yoga, a person prepares himself to leave the body through this gate, especially during the last breath. In this way, he becomes liberated from further cycles of rebirth.

When the energy reaches the Ajna *chakra*, the third eye is said to open, in which a person can see beyond the affects of time. He becomes *trikalagya* or *trikaladarshi*. This means rising above the influence of the three modes of material nature to be the knower of the past, present and future. At this time one also becomes merged in divine consciousness; yet, the identification with a separate ego still remains and keeps the practitioner from attaining perfect unity with Brahman. Only after reaching the Sahasrara *chakra* is there the possibility of perfect *samadhi* and unity with the void or Brahman.

In this way, the practitioner or yogi passes through progressively elevated planes of consciousness. This means that one not only acquires new realizations as each *chakra* becomes opened and the blockages along the path are broken, but he must also give up attachments or hangups on the plane of consciousness related to the *chakra* he has reached for complete unfoldment to take place. In other words, one has to leave his or her habitual and preconceived conceptions of things behind before full perception of the realizations at the next *chakra* can begin. And when one is very inclined toward activities related to the *annamaya-kosha*, or the physical body, it is very difficult to go inward to the more subtle bodies or raise the *kundalini* or *prana* to higher *chakras*. Basically, consciousness goes no higher than the first three *chakras* if one is absorbed in worldly thoughts. Thus, the aspirant must penetrate these lower levels of consciousness if he expects to make any progress at all in this form of yoga. And getting past the Muladhara, the Anahata, and the Ajna *chakras* are the most difficult.

For the average person in the West, this is quite a formidable path to attempt and it takes serious determination to be successful. Of course, there have been reports of those who have been able to raise the *kundalini shakti* to some degree, but there is more to reaching perfection in this system than raising the *shakti* and experiencing whatever mystic powers, bliss, or other feelings that come along. You must also finally completely release the *jiva*, your soul, from the body if you are going to take it to the final step.

This is done by sitting in the proper *asana* and restraining your breathing, and leading the *jivatma*, your individual soul, into the heart of the Muladhara *chakra*. Then by contracting the anus and following the rules for this yoga process, you awaken the *kundalini*. As the *kundalini* awakes, you merge the Paramatma in the impersonal form as the *prana* or life-force into the Sushumna *nadi*. Then you raise it up along with the soul through the different *chakras* to the Ajna *chakra*. There you merge all the diverse elements, from the gross to the subtle, into the *kundalini*, along with the *jivatma*. Then you merge the *kundalini* with the universal Shiva and pierce the Brahma-randhra at the top of the skull and leave the body altogether and finally become merged with the Brahman. If, however, you cannot accomplish this last step, then all of your efforts on this path remain incomplete.

This science of *chakras* is, essentially, a part of the mechanical yoga process. If you follow it properly, certain mystic powers or other results will be achieved as the *chakras* become open, but it is not necessarily in relation to the Supreme Being. In fact, some aspirants do not care about occult powers or opening the *chakras*. They are only interested in realizing God. Thus, they learn to meditate and when they make progress through meditation, the *chakras* open automatically. The opening of the *chakras* may be compared to steps along the path toward God-realization. But many times the achievement and distraction of mystical powers that take place along the way has taken sincere seekers away from the path that leads toward the Absolute Truth. Such powers are often a curse rather than a blessing, as previously explained.

The science of *chakras* at the ultimate stage is used mostly for merging into the void or Brahman effulgence. As we have established by *shastric* evidence in my book, *A The Secret Teachings of the Vedas*, the Brahman effulgence is simply the spiritual rays that emanate from the body of the Supreme, which consists of innumerable spiritual sparks or souls. These sparks, the liberated living entities, indefinitely drift in the eternal spiritual sky without any spiritual engagement. But when there is some tendency for activity, they must return to the material world for engagement since they have no knowledge of, nor did they develop the inclination for, the devotional activities to the Supreme Being that fully manifests on the eternal spiritual planets that exist within the everlasting spiritual sky. After returning to the material worlds by their own free will due to their desire for activity, they again start over and proceed through the rounds of birth and death, going up and down throughout the various levels of planetary systems within the material cosmos, until they start a spiritual process again. Thus, it is considered by the topmost sages that even if one does fulfill all the requirements to reach complete perfection on the path of raja-yoga or kundalini-yoga, he or she still has not reached the ultimate stage of spiritual realization and occupation. This reiterates once again the premise that if you are able to learn the process of bhakti-yoga, do not take it lightly as it is needed along with whatever other yoga or spiritual process you may practice.

LAYA-YOGA

Laya-yoga is very similar to kundalini-yoga, but as one raises the feminine energy at the base of the spine through the *chakras* towards the crown of the head, the emphasis is on meditating on the inner sounds that one experiences at each *chakra*. The final goal is to raise the feminine energy up to the crown *chakra* and merge with the Supreme.

KRIYA-YOGA

It is explained in the *Yoga Sutras* (2.1,2) of Patanjali that Kriya-yoga consists of austerity, the study of sacred texts, surrender to God, and the practice of what is learned and realized. In this way, all external and mental obstacles are removed to bring about the realization of the Absolute.

Kriya-yoga is a system for those who are inclined towards the mystic process. *Kriya* means Action, which can include physical austerities for a wholesome life, study of spiritual knowledge of the soul and consciousness, and the yoga exercises for meditation and the transformative and regenerative processes that assist the body and mind for the upliftment to spiritual awakening. It is a type of *sadhana* or regulatory set of routines for clearing the mind and adjusting the consciousness to perceive higher levels of reality. So Kriya-yoga is meant to combine the most useful parts of all yoga systems.

Among its purposes is to provide a method for recharging the blood with oxygen through its recommended exercises. From this extra oxygen, the atoms are turned into life energy to rejuvenate the *chakras* and brain. By reducing the toxins in the blood, the yogi is able to reduce the decay of tissues and improve his health and prolong his life. One who is advanced is able to get energy from his cells or turn the cells into energy. By mastering it completely, a yogi's body can even dematerialize or materialize at will.

Kriya-yoga is also meant to help clear and purify one's consciousness from unwanted or regressive thought patterns. As the yogi continues to advance, he can turn the energy used for bodily maintenance, such as for breathing and heart action, and use it for higher purposes such as raising inner subtle energies to higher levels. Thus, by breath and mind control the ultimate goal is to unite the mind with divine realms, allowing the yogi to concentrate on the cosmic consciousness or Supersoul within.

Kriya-yoga is also outlined in the *Garuda Purana*. It is stated there that any person who in gladness sees the worship of the Deity in the temple will obtain the results of kriya-yoga, which are described in the *Pancharatra* scripture. In other words, one can learn to concentrate on the Supreme in the heart by years of practice of kriya-yoga, or one can simply walk into the temple and immediately absorb oneself in seeing and meditating on the Deity form of the Lord and obtain a similar result. Kriya-yoga is a system much like devotional service, or bhakti-yoga, but it is especially meant for those who are attached to the performance of mystic yoga and merging into the impersonal Brahman.