

Jñāna Yoga (Yoga of Wisdom) in Hinduism: With Special Reference to the Bhagavad Gītā

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Abstract

The *Jñāna Yoga* literally means “the path of union through knowledge. The Bhagavad Gītā is one of the most influential treatises in Indian philosophy. It is the eternal message of spiritual wisdom from ancient India. It identifies *Jñāna yoga* as one of the three main paths to liberation, the path of knowledge, the path of action and the path of devotion. There are other paths, but these three are important and effective. While the path of devotion is described as superior to the other two, *Jñāna yoga* is suitable for people who are deeply intellectual. On the path of liberation it is important to possess right knowledge, which comes through the study of the scripture and helps us understand the significance of other yogas such as *karma yoga*, *sanyāsa yoga*, *buddhi yoga*, *ātma samyama yoga*, and *bhakti yoga*.

Regarding the importance of *Jñāna* it is well said in the Bhagavad Gītā (IV.38) It means, there is nothing on earth equal in purity to wisdom. He who becomes perfected by yoga finds this of himself in his self in course of time. Hence, perfect and real knowledge is the best thing in this world. One should try to acquire true knowledge from sacred texts as well as from the great teacher for accruing peace and prosperity in life.

However, *Jñāna* (wisdom or knowledge) is considered the most difficult of the four main paths of Yoga, requiring great strength of will and intellect. In *Jñāna yoga*, the mind is used to inquire into its own nature and to transcend the mind’s identification with its thoughts and ego. Hence, the *Jñāna Yoga* is one of the methods for attaining liberation and union with God prescribed by the incarnate Lord Krishna to his friend and disciple Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gītā . This paper will highlight all the features of *Jñāna* yogas as described in Bhagavad Gītā

Keywords: yoga, *Jñāna yoga*, Bhagavad Gita

Introduction

Generally speaking, the word '*Jñāna*' means knowledge. In Hinduism the word has many connotations. Knowledge is viewed by the Hindu scriptures as both liberating and binding. Knowledge is viewed as the means to achieve certain ends. It can be used to fulfil our desires or liberate ourselves from the cycle of births and deaths..

The knowledge that helps us realize our selfish desires and perpetuate our limited identities is considered lower knowledge. It is also termed as *avidyā* or ignorance. The knowledge that helps us overcome our egoistic attitude and desires and realize who we are is considered higher knowledge or the real knowledge.

Jñāna yoga is one of the main paths of yoga that a practitioner can follow on the path to self-realization. It is considered to be the most direct, but also the most difficult path to find absolute truth. The name comes from the Sanskrit term meaning “knowledge.” It is, therefore, the path of pursuing knowledge and truth. This must be a practical, experiential knowledge, however, and not purely a theoretical one.

The word '*Jñāna*' is defined more clearly in a dictionary compiled by the great Sanskritist M. Monier Williams. The definition reads: “knowing, becoming acquainted with, knowledge, (especially) the higher knowledge (derived from meditation on the one Universal Spirit).” In other words, in a yogic context *Jñāna* is the wisdom derived from direct acquaintance with the Self.

The *Jñāna* yoga is also sometimes described as the yoga of the mind or intellect. The concept of *Jñāna* yoga is described in the sacred Hindu text, the Bhagavad Gītā. It may involve progressive study of the scriptures, training and meditation. It is also part of the non-dualistic tradition of Vedānta philosophy.

Advaita Vedānta, one of the major schools of Hindu philosophy, advocates the practise of *Jñāna* Yoga in order to achieve mokṣa. Advaita Vedānta outlines four general qualifications to be fulfilled by one seeking liberation, as well as three stages they must pass through: first, the aspirant must be able to discern what is real from what is only apparently real. Second, he requires a complete disregard and indifference toward sensual pleasure and petty desires, willingly giving up all that which distracts him and prevents his attainment of self-knowledge. Third, he must cultivate self-control (*dama*), endurance (*titikṣā*), dispassion (*uparati*), mental tranquility (*śama*), intentness of mind (*samādhāna*), and faith (*śraddhā*). Fourth, he requires complete dedication to his quest for true understanding, focusing all his desire upon it alone.

The first general stage for the *Advaita jñāni* is known as *śravaṇa* (“hearing”), which involves the study of Advaitic texts, listening to sages, studying the *mahāvākyas* (great sayings) of the Vedas and thinking on their true meaning. This stage provides a framework which can be used for interpretation of the aspiring *jñāni*'s own experiences. The next stage is known as *manana* (“thinking”), which involves prolonged self reflection, incorporating the Advaita philosophical principals into himself. Facilitated by a guru, the *jñāni* aspirant learns about the nature of *Brahman*, and how to discriminate between the different levels of reality. He must analyze the ways in which his knowledge of the world and of himself is constituted, realizing how he has falsely identified himself with mere partial expressions of his self. The final stage is *nididhyāsana* (constant meditation). In this stage the *jñāni* actively pursues self-realization, maintaining intense concentration upon his own self as Brahman. Detached from all egoism and distractions, he cuts away all lower level experiences and false identifications standing between him and the true Self. Upon the true realization that he is Brahman and Brahman is everything, the *jñāni* achieves mokṣa, becoming a *jīvanmukta*, one who is liberated while living.

The intention when practicing *Jñāna* yoga is to use the mind to understand and uncover the truth behind the mind. This path requires a mind which is both open and rational. In Hindu scriptures, there is some criticism of the *Jñāna* yogis who only try to seek knowledge in a purely theoretical manner. Since it is meant to be an experiential path, simply accepting dogmatic teaching is not enough. The practitioner instead needs to seek an experience of the knowledge of God, or universal Consciousness or absolute Truth. They must seek to know God on a level deeper than the intellect.

The path of *Jñāna* yoga was first encouraged and fully outlined by Adi Jagadguru Shankaracharya. He stated that a practitioner of *Jñāna* yoga, or a *jñāni*, needed both complete renunciation and a deep desire to be free from *māyā*, or illusions.

It is said that once the student is ready, achieving the goal of *Jñāna* yoga may take as little as a few days. The ideal three-step path of *Jñāna* yoga is as follows:

1. The student is taught about Vedāntic philosophy by a guru, or spiritual teacher, and they listen carefully.
2. The student reflects on these teachings and seeks to understand their subtleties.
3. The student meditates on Brahman as described in the Vedāntic texts and, through this combination of knowledge and meditation; he/she experiences absolute Truth.

Experiencing true knowledge through *Jñāna* yoga allows the practitioner to know God and be liberated. To achieve this, *Jñāna* yogis will also draw on elements of Bhakti yoga, as part of the experience of knowing God is practicing devotion.

Jñāna (wisdom or knowledge) is considered the most difficult of the four main paths of Yoga, requiring great strength of will and intellect. In *Jñāna* yoga, the mind is used to inquire into its own nature and to transcend the mind's identification with its thoughts and ego. The fundamental goal of *Jñāna* yoga is to become liberated from the illusionary world of *māyā* (thoughts and perceptions) and to achieve union of the inner Self (*Atman*) with the oneness of all life (*Brahman*). This is achieved by steadfastly practicing the mental techniques of self-questioning, reflection and conscious illumination that are defined in the Four Pillars of Knowledge.

It can be difficult to grasp or comprehend the intellectual approach of *Jñāna* yoga, and since one can easily overemphasize intellectual attainment it is important to cultivate humility and compassion on this path. It is easy to become entangled in the constructs and thoughts of the mind and lose sight of the goal of *Jñāna*: to realize the divine oneness inherent in all beings. Obviously, this approach would be contraindicated for anyone with a history of mental disease or emotional instability. It is also highly advised to find a competent teacher before divulging deeply into the path of *Jñāna* yoga.

The Bhagavad Gītā is one of the most influential treatises in Indian philosophy. It is the eternal message of spiritual wisdom from ancient India. The word Gītā means song and the word Bhagavad means God, often the Bhagavad Gītā is called the Song of God. The Bhagavad Gītā identifies *Jñāna* yoga as one of the three main paths to liberation, the path of knowledge, the path of action and the path of devotion. There are other paths, but these three are important and effective. While the path of devotion is described as superior to the other two, *Jñāna* yoga is suitable for people who are deeply intellectual. On the path of liberation it is important to possess right knowledge, which comes through the study of the scripture and helps us understand the significance of other yogas such as *karma yoga*, *sanyāsa yoga*, *buddhi yoga*, *ātma samyama yoga*, and *bhakti yoga*.

Regarding the importance of *Jñāna* it is well said in the Bhagavad Gītā as:

*na hi jñānena sadṛśaṁ pavitram iha vidyate /
tat svayam yoga samsiddhaḥ kālenātmani vindati //* (Bhagavad Gītā, IV.38.)

It means, there is nothing on earth equal in purity to wisdom. He who becomes perfected by yoga finds this of himself in his self in course of time. Hence, perfect and real knowledge is the best thing in this world. One should try to acquire true knowledge from sacred texts as well as from the great teacher for accruing peace and prosperity in life.

After this it is said that who can acquire perfect wisdom, in reply the Bhagavad Gītā says:

*śraddāvān labhate Jñānaṁ tat paraḥ saṁjatendriyaḥ /
jñānaṁ labdhvā parāṁ śāntim acireṇādhigacchati //* (Ibid., IV.39.)

It means, he who has faith, who is absorbed in it (*i.e.* wisdom) and who has subdued his senses gains wisdom and having gained wisdom he attains quickly the Supreme Peace. Here, faith is necessary for gaining wisdom. Faith is not blind belief. It is the aspiration of the soul to gain wisdom. It is the reflection in the empirical self of the wisdom that dwells in the deepest level of our being. If faith is constant, it takes us to the realization of wisdom. *Jñāna* as wisdom is free from doubts, which intellectual knowledge where we depend on sense data and logical inference, doubt and scepticism have their place. Wisdom is not acquired by these means. We have to live it inwardly and grow into its reality. This way to it is through faith and self-control.

Writers on *Jñāna* yoga often liken ignorance of the Self to a factory manager who fails to communicate with the owner of the factory. The manager begins to behave as if he, himself, was the owner, and in the process the relationship between the manager and owner is undermined.

Out of ignorance, the manager becomes arrogant, selfish, and blind to the real purpose of the factory's work. In the human personality, the ego serves as the manager. It is the ego which must ultimately coordinate the functions of the mind and body, and in the process it must expand its own vision of reality. When, the ego is blinded by attachment and unable to disengage itself from its own sense of self-importance, our perceptions of a higher reality dim.

But the path of *Jñāna* yoga leads toward realization of the Self. It restores balance and harmony to the ego and nourishes the individual consciousness in a manner in which the world cannot. Meditation and contemplation both foster realization of the Self. In meditation we create a strong inner centre from which we are able to witness the distinctions between consciousness and the field of consciousness. In contemplation we reflect on the temporary nature of life and clarify for ourselves the nature of consciousness. Each method reduces the painful enmeshment of Self and non-self, and leads to a direct experience of reality.

The *Jñāna* Yoga is one of the methods for attaining liberation and union with God, prescribed by the incarnate Lord Krishna to his friend and disciple Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gītā. *Jñāna* Yoga literally means “the path of union through knowledge.”

During the course of the discussion, *Jñāna* Yoga is described as a method for attaining spiritual liberation, along with Karma Yoga (the path of action), Bhakti Yoga (the path of devotion or love), as well as Rāja Yoga (the path of meditation). *Jñāna* Yoga emphasizes focused contemplation, the object of which is the Divine. The *Jñāna* Yoga practitioner (*jñāni*) must become adept at discriminating between the real and unreal. Our experiences and perceptions are impermanent and fleeting, having both beginning and end. The only abiding reality is that of Brahman (Absolute Reality), which is equated with the Atman, the Supreme Self. Lord Krishna discusses what he terms “the Field” and “the Knower of the Field”. The “Field” includes the body, senses, and mind/ego. The knower of the field is the true Self, the *ātman*. The *jñāni* learns the true self through relentlessly analyzing, separating and distinguishing the elements that make up reality. *Jñāna* Yoga is fundamentally the practise of proclaiming *neti, neti* (not this, not this), a concept seen in the Upaniṣads: the *jñāni* comes to realize the true Self by defining what it is not, specifically the body, mind, senses, and any object or experience (“the Field”).

As the *jñāni* strips away these false notions of self, through self discipline he should restrain his senses and withdraw from the sensual world, likened to a tortoise withdrawing its limbs into its shell. Having so withdrawn, the desire for sensual pleasures will remain; however, once the *jñāni* attains a vision of the Supreme, this desire will disappear. The *jñāni* should become detached and indifferent to the world. Krishna describes the ideal sage as such:

prajahāti yadā kāmān sarvān pārtha manogatān/

ātmanyevā' tmanā tuṣṭaḥ śhīta-prajñā-śtadoccyate // (Bhagavad Gītā , II.55)

The Blessed Lord said: O Partha, when a man gives up all varieties of sense desire which arise from mental concoction, and when his mind finds satisfaction in the self alone, then he is said to be in pure transcendental consciousness.

duḥkheṣu anudvignamanāḥ sukheṣu vigatasprhaḥ /

vītarāga-bhaya-krodhaḥ śhītadhīr-munir-ucyate // (Bhagavad Gītā, II.56.)

It means, he whose mind is untroubled in the midst of sorrows and is free from eager desire amid pleasures, he from whom passion, fear, and rage have passed away, he is called a sage of settled intelligence. Besides, who is without affection on any side, who does not rejoice or loathe as he obtains good or evil, his intelligence is firmly set in wisdom. (Bhagavad Gītā, II.57) In addition to these, he who draws away the senses from the objects of sense of every side as a tortoise draws in his limbs in to the shell, his intelligence is firmly set (in wisdom).

(Ibid., II.58.) So, having brought all the senses under control, he should remain firm in yoga intent on Me (Lord Krishna); for he, whose senses are under control, his intelligence is firmly set. (Ibid., II. 61)

However, one not agitated despite all kinds of distress, whose aspiration for happiness is gone, and who is devoid of pass, fear and anger...He who is not attracted to anything, and having attained this or that, good or bad, does not rejoice but is not averse either – his wisdom is firmly established as clearly described in the Bhagavad Gītā.

Hence, the real knowledge liberates us from the three impurities of human existence, namely egoism, desire ridden actions and the illusion that we are different from the rest of the world and that the objective reality which we experience through our senses is real and permanent. So according to the Bhagavad Gītā, the *Jñāna* yoga is therefore, the pursuit of true knowledge by learning how to control our minds and senses and centre ourselves in our spiritual selves so that we can become free from our bondage to the cycle of the births and deaths and achieve liberation.

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