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# Yoga: Paths to Pain and Peace

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### Yoga: Paths to Pain and Peace

Hindus, by virtue of being part of a religion that varies tremendously amongst its followers in regards to beliefs and practices, have an understanding that there are many paths to enlightenment. Hindu scriptures and people acknowledge a concept known as karma. In this context, karma is a system of consequences related to actions. Actions performed during one lifetime determine the quality of the next life. This cycle of death and rebirth is known as samsara. Moksha is liberation from this cycle of reincarnation, through enlightenment. The paths of liberation from samsara include the path of devotion, the path of action, and the path of meditation. The Hindu paths of liberation have the capability to both trap people into suffering and mentally liberate them from pain in the material world.

Bhakti yoga, or the way of devotion, is a path of liberation that involves love and attachment towards the Divine. The Divine can be a specific god, multiple gods, or an all pervading, formless divine presence that exist throughout all of the living world known as Brahman. Bhakti or devotion can take the form of prayer, poetry, songs, and dance. Bhakti yoga is notable for the strength it provides for devotees who engage with it. The story “Conquest of the Snake Kaliya” is an example of how the path of devotion provides strength to those who follow it, liberating devotees from the constraints and pains of this world. Many myths involving the god, Krishna, use his friends, family, and lovers as metaphors for the relationship between

God and his passionate devotees. (A notable example of this is the love the cowherd girls and boys have Krishna. They are enamored with this god, as some believe one's love for god should be rapturous.) In the story "Conquest of Kaliya", Krishna's friends had fallen dead after drinking water from a poisoned lake. However, their loving relationship with this god revives them. "The tears of Krishna brought them all back to life. For His mercy and love could not fail to give strength, and He poured them out in abundance over His fainting friends" (Nivedita). This metaphor of bhakti demonstrates the strength the path of devotion can give to people who are in turmoil or conflict. However, the strengths of the path of devotion can be seen beyond oral storytelling and scriptures. In the documentary *Kumaré*, the narrator, Vikram Gandhi, who is skeptical of religion, himself, acknowledges the calm that washes over his grandmother when she performs, puja, prayer rituals (Gandhi). Bhakti yoga has also historically been the path of liberation for the marginalized, who are often oppressed by the caste system and patriarchy put in place by the path of action, and have no access to education, shunning them from the path of knowledge (which involves the study of scriptures). I, myself, have grown up with the stories of women and Dalit (those who are shunned by the four level caste system) who became renowned Bhakti poets and seen people in my own life gain a comfort and power in throwing themselves into the way of love, affection, and devotion towards the Divine. This strength gained from bhakti is evidently why it is a well regarded path of liberation from suffering and the ills of the material world.

On the other hand, other paths of liberation have more complicated effects on Hindus. Karma yoga is the path of unselfish action and acting in accordance with one's duty, without regard for the fruits of their right actions. This path of liberation is notable for its institutionalization within Indian culture, because most Hindus (if they are of South Asian

descent) will be impacted by the effects of the path of action, regardless of whether they wish to follow it. The path of action has a tendency to create suffering and oppression, while providing comfort through structure and a sense of purpose.

One major aspect of the path of action is the caste system. William Dalrymple, a travel writer, details the stories of Hindus around India in his book *Nine Lives*. “The Daughters of Yellamma” revolves around an interview between Dalrymple and devadasi named Rani Bai. Devadasis are young women that have been dedicated to a god; in this case, Rani Bai and her fellow devadasis have been dedicated to the goddess Yellamma. Devadasis are almost always Dalit women. They come from families that already face marginalization by the caste system and decide to dedicate their daughters to the goddess in order to earn money. This source of income is sex trafficking, which further ostracizes these girls from the rest of society. When Rani Bai tells Dalrymple the story of how her family forced her into sex work when she was fourteen, she says her aunt told her, “This is your dharma, your duty, your work. It is inauspicious to cry” (Dalrymple 61). In this context, karma yoga is used as reason to facilitate child rape and sex trafficking. Interestingly enough, none of the devadasis seem to scorn the goddess Yellamma, even though their dedication to her is the root of their sexual trauma, discrimination, inability to enter other careers, and fatal AIDS crisis. (Devadasis are usually dedicated between ages six and nine; they drop out of school before they can get any substantial education.) Despite their suffering, the devadasis believe Yellamma is watching over them. When suffering occurs, such as when both of Rani Bai’s daughters died of AIDS, they will attribute these hardships to Yellamma cursing them for some sins from a past life. The path of duty creates pain for devadasis, keeping them trapped in their tragic circumstances, while providing some mental comfort that there is a Divine presence that will reward them for enduring their hardships.

As referenced earlier, caste system plays a major role performing one's duty in the path of action. There is a four fold hierarchy of castes known as the four varnas. At the top of the hierarchy are Brahmin or the priestly caste. Directly below Brahmins are the Kshatriyas or warrior caste, then Vaishyas or agriculturalists and traders, and finally the Shudras or servant caste. Dalits are below and outside the varna system and subjected to untouchability. In most cases, Dalits would not be seen as more holy than the priestly caste that oppresses them. However, Dalrymple's story, "The Dancer of Kannur" in *Nine Lives*, details an exception. Hari Das is a Dalit man who works as a well builder and polices a jail, where his safety is constantly at risk. His third source of work is performing theyyam. Theyyam is an art form and mode of worship involving dancers that wear elaborate costumes and drummers. Theyyam performers are believed to be vehicles for the gods, which is why they are worshipped even by Brahmins. Hari Das is illuminated by his experiences with theyyam, because when he fulfills his duty as a theyyam performer he finds a gaping disparity between the reverence Brahmins have for him as a vessel of God and in his day to day life as a Dalit laborer. It is also worth noting that the songs of theyyam often criticize the caste system and call upon upper caste people to treat their fellow humans with dignity and respect. "The Dancer of Kannur" displays an dichotomy of the effects of the different paths of liberation. Theyyam can be considered a form of bhakti yoga, as it is a ritual in which those who watch theyyam performances are paying respects and devotion to a living and dancing god. By following his father's path as a theyyam dancer, Hari Das is able to break from societal constraints through the path of devotion and to some extent, the path of action. However, the path of action is what traps Hari Das and enables the same Brahmins who worship him as a theyyam performer to oppress him as a Dalit in his daily life, outside of costume and ritual.

While many Hindus are engaged with the path of devotion and the path of action, the path of meditation is one of the ways of liberation which has gained a massive following worldwide. The physical practice of postures and deep breathing has been present amongst Hindus for thousands of years, and has reached many non Hindu populations in the past century. One reason why this may be so is because the path of meditation has the potential to liberate people by providing them with tools to become the masters of their own physical and mental control. On the flip side, some gurus have exploited people's interest in the path of meditation in order to manipulate and gain privileges. If people become dependant on gurus, especially those without integrity, people may simply become trapped in their own circumstances and dependant on a useless relationship or belief system. Vikram Gandhi is one man who was inspired by dubious gurus to pretend to become a guru in his own documentary, *Kumaré*. Although this is an unorthodox approach involving made up meditation rituals and fake yoga poses, Gandhi demonstrates that the path of meditation is a tool that people can use to liberate themselves and better their own lives. When he reveals himself to be a sham, many of his followers still respect him and follow his meditation practices because they were positively impacted by his message that people must become their own teachers. Those who ignored this message and simply would revere Gandhi as a holy man dropped his teachings when they learned of the truth. The path of meditation is interesting because it places the path of liberation from suffering in one's own hands, rather than in following social constraints or praising a god.

The paths of devotion, action, and meditation vary greatly in their approaches to liberation from the material world and its suffering. This variation leads to varying impacts on followers. Bhakti yoga or the path of devotion has the power to lift people from social constraints and provide a loving comfort. Karma yoga or the path of action provides a sense of

purpose but also marginalization of Dalits and tremendous suffering. The path of meditation provides control of the self through physical and mental practice, but if a follower seeks the wrong teachers, they can become trapped rather than liberated. It stands to say that the paths of liberation have the potential to trap and liberate people from the suffering they endure in this life.

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