

Why Did Yoga and Vedanta Diverge?

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Rob: James and Sundari, thank you so much for your work on the ShiningWorld site. The past year has consisted of a lot of self-inquiry for me. I've been using almost everything I could from your ShiningWorld site. I really love every book and video I have come across.

Ramji: They were always divergent. They deal with two different topics, action and knowledge. The *Upanishads* present both topics but the relationship between them is not always clear, so *rajasic* people assumed that they could do their way to *moksa*, so Yoga developed. *Sattvic* people are knowledge-motivated, so they were attracted to the knowledge and they made the relationship clear. Knowledge is for *moksa* and action is for purification of the mind.

Rob: 2. Also, do you feel like the word Yoga is often misinterpreted as “union” of the *jiva's* consciousness with the Self (universal consciousness) as if they are separate (duality).

Ramji: Yes, indeed.

Rob: I heard you interpret Yoga as “union,” but you defined union as understanding once. Do you think Yoga is meant to be interpreted as the understanding that the *jiva's* consciousness and the universal consciousness are one (non-dual)?

Ramji: Yes. Yoga is an action word. But you can present knowledge with experiential language although it is confusing. The *Gita* does it because Arjuna is *rajasic*. That is one reason you need a teacher who is clear on the relationship between action and knowledge.

Rob: 3. Lastly, do you think that using the name Vedanta is better than saying *jnana yoga*, even though they are synonymous, since *jnana yoga*, includes the word “yoga” and may have some dualistic connotations?

Ramji: Yes. But *yogis* often develop an interest in knowledge, so *jnana yoga* is a term that they can relate to.

Sundari: Hello, Rob, I know James has already replied to you, but here is a slightly longer reply to some of your questions. I hope it helps.

The word *yoga* has two primary meanings in Sanskrit. The most common and popular meaning is the first: union, contact or connection. The second meaning is “topic,” traditionally used in conjunction with another word, *pramana*, which means

“a means of knowledge.” Vedanta is a traditional path known as *jnana yoga* – or Self-knowledge – but this *yoga* is knowledge-based, not experience-based. It is the knowledge that ends the quest for knowledge and experience.

Yoga is a dualistic path for doers who want to connect with or contact the Self, based on the idea that reality is dual and that there are two selves, a real or “true” Self and a limited self, a person. It says that the two are different, but both are real. Yoga says that the limited person can experience limitlessness, i.e. freedom, if it can “contact” the true or higher Self. Yoga involves many practices that are meant to put the limited self “in contact” or union with the real or true Self, i.e. limitless awareness. In reply to the idea that Yoga is a system of experience-oriented practices that yoke the limited self to the limitless Self, one of our great sages, Badarayana, says that Vedanta is “the *yoga* of no-contact.” He means that it is only knowledge. Vedanta is the knowledge that there is only one Self, and it is the means (teachings) that deliver that knowledge when wielded by a qualified teacher to a qualified inquirer.

However, Vedanta endorses Yoga as a means to prepare the mind for Self-knowledge. It argues that in most cases one can’t get the knowledge of non-duality and enjoy the fruit of Self-knowledge as long as the *citta vrittis (vasanas)* are binding. Therefore Vedanta endorses Yoga as a means of purification of the mind (*anta karana shuddi*) and preparation of the mind, since a pure, prepared mind is necessary for the assimilation of Self-knowledge. The reason Vedanta is not a path of Yoga is that Vedanta negates the doer, the *yogi*. It shows that the doer, the *yogi*, is an apparent, not a real, Self. It establishes the apparent person’s identity as limitless, actionless consciousness, not as a limited doer of actions.

Traditional Vedanta, although non-dual, teaches two paths: a path of action (*yoga*) for doers and a path of knowledge for inquirers (see the *Bhagavad Gita*). Vedanta integrates the two paths in this way: seekers start out looking for freedom as doers; but you can’t “do” your way to freedom, because as the Self you are already, and always have been, free. As one practices *yoga, karma yoga* particularly, one’s hang-ups (*citta vrittis/vasanas*) are ameliorated and the mind of the *yogi*, the doer, becomes increasingly contemplative. He or she discovers the limitation of action and becomes an inquirer, i.e. contemplative, and is capable of appreciating the essence of Vedanta: *brahma satyam jagan mithya, jivo bramaiva na parah*, which means that consciousness is the limitless Self, and that the individual, the *yogi/meditator*, is non-different from consciousness.

Once Self-knowledge is assimilated, the *yogi* remains as an apparent self, but that apparent self appears as an unreal object to you, awareness/consciousness (*chaitanyam*). Something that is apparent is as good as non-existent (even though it does exist), but it and the world it inhabits has no effect on you, consciousness. Vedanta breaks our connection to our apparent identity and establishes our true identity as limitless awareness. Thus freedom is attained only by knowledge, not by action.

Therefore Vedanta is all for meditation and *yoga*. But, meditation/*yoga* practice does not equal *vicara*, Self-inquiry, because meditation/*yoga* is not a valid means of knowledge. It is a tool to aid self-inquiry; it does not equal self-inquiry. Unless you have realized that you are not the meditator/*yogi* but the one who knows the meditator/*yogi*, meditation/*yoga* can keep you stuck for years trying to have an experience of the Self. Which many meditators/*yogis* do have, but the problem is the identification with the experiencer/meditator (the doer) is still there. Unless the

knowledge that meditation is designed to impart is fully assimilated, i.e. "I am whole and complete, non-dual awareness" and not the meditator/*yogi*, the experience ends because it was just that, an experience. All experience takes place in time and therefore has a beginning and an end, which is true of any spiritual experience: epiphany, *samadhi* or *kundalini* awakening.

The experience of Self-realization that meditation/*yoga* can bring does not necessarily lead to freedom, *moksa*. It does not necessarily result in peace of mind either. Stepping up the meditation/*yoga* practice merely compounds the problem because the main issue remains unaddressed: there is a doer, a *yogi*, a meditator, or ego, involved. Hence the reason there are so many frustrated meditators or spiritual experiencers around, trying to get the feel-good experience back. Even if they succeed, they will most likely "lose" the Self-realization once again because the knowledge that they are that which makes all experience possible, i.e. awareness/SELF, escapes them.

Meditation is no different from any other activity done to achieve a particular result; it is truly beneficial only if practiced with the *karma yoga* attitude. *Karma yoga* involves consecrating every thought word and deed to *Isvara* (the Field of Existence) with an attitude of gratitude and taking whatever results that come as *prasad*. Additionally, without Self-knowledge, which unfolds what it means to be awareness, not just to know about awareness, you are stuck at the experiential level of Self-realization. When you come off the high of the meditation/*yoga* experience, the person is still there, with all their problems. Very often, even worse off than before because of failed expectations, the hope that the experience was somehow supposed to make the person better or different. It never does.

Vedanta says there is no point in trying to perfect the person, because they are *mithya* – only apparently real – meaning not always present and always changing. You cannot alter something that is not real, and you cannot alter or improve something that is real – *satya*/consciousness, that which is always present and unchanging – either. *Moksa* is understanding the difference between the two and never confusing your Self, *satya*, with *mithya*.

While meditation/*yoga* can give you an experience of who you are, the knowledge that *yoga* points to is that the meditator is the reflection of the Self, you, appearing in a still mind. However, seeing as no experience can take place without you, awareness, and because as awareness you are actionless, no special experience is required to experience the Self. You are always experiencing the Self, whether you are meditating or not. The Self is self-effulgent; it does not need anything to know itself. But if ignorance of this fact is covering the mind, it does not know this. And the prevailing belief in *yoga* which stands in the way is that we need to do something or perfect the *jiva* to contact the Self, which is mostly why meditators are meditating, whereas self-inquiry is not an experience, it is the application of discriminative knowledge.

Self-inquiry is thus very different from meditation/*yoga*. Its success depends on the qualifications present in the mind. Self-knowledge reveals that awareness is your true nature and all experience (objects) arise from you and appear in you, but you are free of the objects. The objects are you, but you are not the objects. Keeping this knowledge in mind and continually contemplating on it is Self-inquiry. Self-inquiry as a practice is different from meditation/*yoga* because knowledge is maintained by an act of will, whereas in meditation/*yoga* the knowledge "I am awareness" appears (or not) during a particular experience. Self-knowledge does not generally appear in

meditation/*yoga*; if it does, the meditator/*yogi* usually does not realize the importance of the thought or understand what it means, and therefore does not take awareness as his or her identity, so the knowledge is not assimilated.

Therefore self-inquiry is superior to meditation/*yoga* because the doer does not need to maintain a particular state and wait for the knowledge. He or she has the knowledge already and applies it continually. Meditators/*yogis* do not know the value of Self-knowledge, whereas inquirers do. The act of will required for self-inquiry is a burning desire for freedom from limitation born of the knowledge that there is nothing to gain through experience/objects. You cannot compare self-inquiry with meditation/*yoga*; they are completely different. Self-inquiry involves subjecting the mind with great dedication to a valid and independent means of knowledge, i.e. Vedanta. As stated above but bears repeating: assuming Self-inquiry is done correctly, i.e. with the *karma yoga* attitude, the necessary qualifications are present, and you are taught by a qualified teacher, Self-knowledge does “the work” of removing ignorance.

No action taken by a limited entity can produce a limitless result, so meditation/*yoga* as an action without *karma yoga* most often results in frustration because it will not remove ignorance. Self-inquiry, on the other hand, although an action, can produce a limitless result because the outcome is Self-knowledge, which is limitless and has the power to remove ignorance. Meditators/*yogis*, in general, are not interested in negating the meditator/*yogi*; they are interested in getting a particular experience for the meditator/*yogi*. So the mediator/*yogi* remains intact; in fact the doer is reinforced by meditation/*yoga*.

Vedanta states that *moksa* is *viveka*, meaning discrimination based on knowledge. Further complications arise with most Westerners involved in *yoga*, who tend to have the idea that *vritti/vasana kyshaya* – removal of all thoughts and *vasanas* – constitutes *moksa*. If you view *moksa* as *yoga*, i.e. *chitta vritti nirodha*, it is not *moksa*, because the Self is free and can be known as one’s Self whether or not the *chitta vrittis* exist. *Yoga* is good for removing *vrittis*, and we can successfully argue that it is highly unlikely that a *yogi* will discriminate the intellect from the Self if the *tamasic* and *rajasic vrittis* have not been attenuated by *yoga*. Vidyaranya Swami says (and we agree) *yoga* may be a “leading error” insofar as a *yogi* working on his or her *samskaras* and achieving various *samadhis* may after some time convert the desire to experience *samadhi* into self-inquiry that will lead to *viveka*, discrimination. But it is the exception rather than the rule because *yogis* tend to take up *yoga* with the belief that *moksa* is *samadhi*, not discrimination.

We say that Vedanta is superior to Yoga in the context of the knowledge/experience debate about the nature of *moksa*, not because we have a bone to pick with Yoga. Most seekers want to relieve their suffering with some kind of beatific experience and are attracted to Yoga for that reason. If they are occasionally successful, they usually continue to put more effort to gain subtler and subtler *samadhis*. They tend to end up frustrated because no *jiva* can control experience; that’s *Isvara*’s job. And *yogis* tend to have big egos because they can more or less achieve high states of mind with willpower, believing they are responsible. The doer is alive and well.

When you have Self-knowledge, there is no longer any need for meditation, spiritual experiences of whatever ilk or “high states” of being, because as the Self you are beyond all states: all states are known to you. One no longer chases the experience of awareness, because you know that you are only ever experiencing awareness, no matter what is or is not happening in the mind; you welcome meditation because it

feels good for the mind; you do not need to be in meditation to experience the Self. In fact you could be sick, broke, even sad, and be experiencing the Self because you are not identified with your state of mind. There is no need for long beards and flowing robes (or fancy *yoga* gear and retreats) to make a statement that one is enlightened or “looks the part.” You can just be a regular and very ordinary person, living a seemingly ordinary life, knowing full well that you are not the person but the Self, thus unobtrusively experiencing an extraordinary life.

~ Much love, Sundari