

The Practice of Yoga Part 1: Jnana Yoga

~by Reverend Jaganath Carrera

Who am I? This, the most basic of all questions, is one that we never seem to answer satisfactorily. The branch of Yoga that centers on answering this question through study and self-examination is Jnana Yoga, the Yoga of Wisdom. It is a path of exploration and encounter. We explore the nature of the self and life and along the way, encounter the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that cause suffering and those that bring peace and joy. Not a dry intellectual or philosophical pursuit, Jnana Yoga is filled with the joy of discovery. It is the path of Yoga suited for those who have inquisitive natures, who seek to understand the spirit behind the letter of the law, and who wish to experience the truths represented in myth and symbols. Like all branches of Yoga, the ultimate goal of Jnana Yoga is to overcome suffering by direct realization of our True Nature, which is unbounded, unlimited peace and joy.

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A Taste of Jnana Yoga

Rather than start with Jnana Yoga theory, let's begin by engaging in some self-examination. We will briefly focus on an assumption that almost everyone shares, but may have never fully addressed: the belief that who we are - our nature or identity - is in some way a combination of our body and mind.

Let's begin with the body. Is my essential nature physical? Try to answer the following questions, not in a quick mechanical way, but after a period of focus and attention. "Am I my thumb? Is my sense of self located in my thumb? If it is, then if I lose my thumb, shouldn't I cease to exist? In any case, I seem to be separate from the thumb, aware of it, watching it, experiencing it. What about my arm, Stomach, or Lungs?" It should be fairly easy to notice that you are not contained in any one body part. Maybe your self-identity is housed in the body as a whole.

Try this experiment. Point to yourself. Now, if I ask you what you pointed to most will say, "my chest," or "my head." Some will make a grand sweep of the hand from head to toe, and say, "my body." You seem to be pointing to parts of yourself, but never you.

Notice how our common everyday language displays an intuitive grasp that we are not the body . . . *my arm, my leg, my lungs, my body*. That doesn't sound different from, *my shirt, my watch, my glasses*. I am not the body, but it's owner.

What about my mind? I can know the contents of my conscious mind at any moment. "I am tall. "I am happy." "I am remembering you." "I can picture my hometown even now." If *I* can know the contents of the mind: thoughts, words, images, feelings – than my mind may not be who I am. The contents of the mind changes constantly and rapidly, but "I" feeling – the sense of self-awareness - remains. There is some part of aspect of who we are that is beyond thought processes, the essential core of who we are that witnesses all the changes that the mind goes through, and is the seat of our self-identity. I am the owner and witness of my mind just as I am the witness of my body.

Practicing his self-examination can have a profound impact on the suffering we face in life. It deepens and refines how we experience life. When I feel pain, it is worth contemplating: "Am *I* in pain or is it *my knee*?" If I'm not in pain, if the discomfort is in my body, then my mind has the potential to transcend that pain, learn what lessons that can be gained from the experience, and be at peace.

The same is true for psychological pain. Am *I* unhappy, or angry or fearful, or is it *my mind* that is experiencing all these emotions? If I can rise above the sorrow, anger, or fear by not misidentifying it as me, I will gain the clarity, strength, and creativity to find my way through the pain, wiser and at peace.

The Self

If we are not the body or mind, who are we? We are pure, unlimited, eternal consciousness. It's not just an expanded version of everyday consciousness, like switching to a wide-angle lens. This is awareness with no bounds. It is not limited to space and time or any name or form.

This unbounded consciousness could just as correctly be called love, peace, joy, truth, or God. Words can only give us a hint of It. Even adding all the words together still only gives us a vague glimpse into the transcendent truth of this Cosmic Consciousness. Sacred texts call this transcendent reality by many names, but perhaps the most personal is the Self (*atman*). These same texts declare that this Self is "nearer to us than our own hearts." The Self is the eternal witness of not only the body and mind, but of all there is. It is always awake, witnessing every experience – every situation, thought, and feeling. Nothing, conscious or subconscious, is unknown to It. Because it is beyond the reach of suffering, those who have directly experienced It, declare that this Self is unshakable peace and joy.

There is only one Self that is the ground, or stuff of Creation. Everything – our bodies and minds, included – are waves in an infinite ocean of consciousness. Waves are not separate from the ocean, nor are they objects in the ocean. They don't fear each other and there is no dread of injury or death. Small waves aren't jealous of their larger sisters and brother waves. It's all H₂O - the ocean and waves are one. In that oneness, there is harmony of purpose. All movements of the ocean are meaningful. We are waves of consciousness that are one with the infinite ocean of consciousness that is the Self. Where Oneness is experienced, there can be no fear, envy, or suffering. Instead, there is harmony, peace, and joy.

Hearing this truth isn't enough to erase our anxieties. We need to open our minds to insights that lie outside the box of our normal perception and conceptions.

The Problems Caused by Misperception

Our experience and understanding of life and who we are is determined by our beliefs and perceptions, the accuracy of which are governed by the condition of the instrument of perception, the mind.

Life can be a heaven or hell depending on the clarity, focus, and objectivity of our mind. If we walk into a dimly lit room and see a coiled shape in the corner, we might bolt in fear. A snake! Our heart beats faster. Blood pressure rises. Adrenaline pours into our bloodstream. Run! Later, our brave friend comes to chase out our unwelcome intruder. Peeking into the room, she turns on the light. It isn't a snake after all. It was a coiled rope. What a relief! And . . . what an embarrassment! There was never any danger. Yet, our bodies and minds reacted exactly the same as if we were faced with a reptilian threat. Perception – in this case, a false perception - determined our reality. This misperception could only take place in a dimly lit room. In the darkness, we see neither snake nor rope. In the light, the rope's identity is evident. In the same way, when our minds are totally

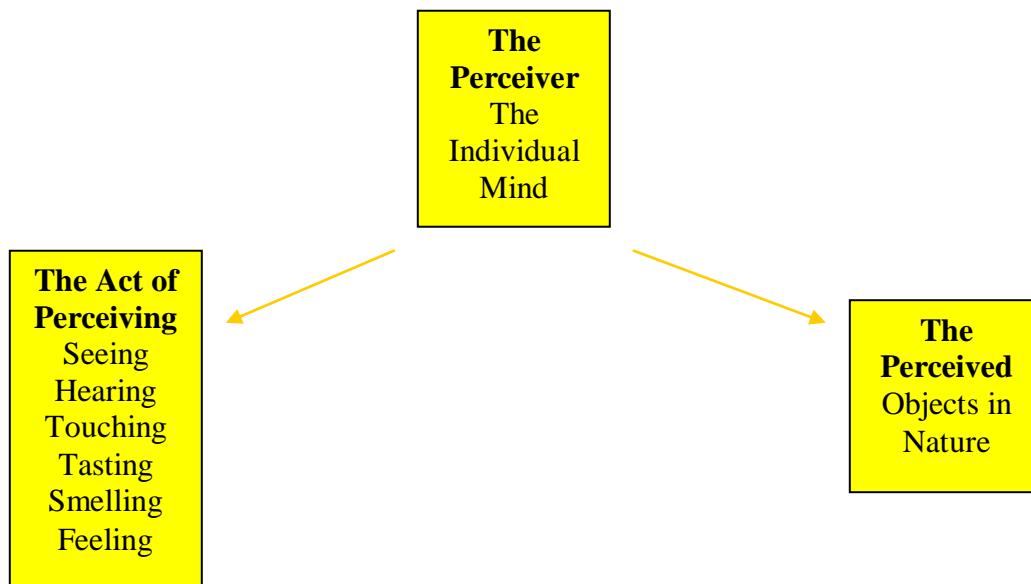
oblivious of the Self, we don't recognize spiritual truths. In full light, we see that there is nothing to fear. But when the mind is partially awake, it is subject to the distortions and obscuring power of ignorance and egoism.

Misperception causes a lot of problems in life. How can we navigate the unexpected twists and turns of life if we can't clearly perceive storm tracks, currents, or sandbars? Even worse, we can't properly guide the movement of our ship since we haven't yet connected with the captain, the Self.

The most fundamental misperception (*avidya*), the one that gives birth to all others, is the misperception that we are simply a body and mind. As long as this basic ignorance remains, we will run from what we think will bring us pain and run toward that which we believe will bring happiness or peace. All the while, that which we seek is in us as our True Nature. In order to help bring order to the chaos of ignorance, we should first examine the phenomenon of perception.

The Phenomenon of Perception

For perception to take place, three factors are needed: a *perceiver* (the mind), an object that is *perceived* (made known to the mind), and *perceiving*, the act that connects the mind to the object of perception (the act of becoming aware of). You could also substitute the words, knower, known, and knowing.



Examples: **I** (perceiver), **smell** (act of perception) a **flower** (object of perception).

I (perceiver) **throw** (act of perception) the **ball** (object of perception).

I (perceiver) **am** (act of perception) **unhappy** (object of perception).

The above diagram presents a tidy picture of perception. The mind, as the knower, illumines the process of perception. It is aware of the object (or event) that is known as well as the act of knowing. But this scenario is not complete. What's missing is the answer to this question: how the mind know that it knows? We sniff the flower and are aware of the fragrance, the act of sniffing, and that it is *we* who are sniffing. But there is

another level of awareness. We *know* that we are aware of all three aspects of perception. I am not only aware of the fragrance and the sniffing, but of the one who is conscious of the entire act.

There is something that witnesses my mind when it is happy, in pain, hungry, or in love. It is the true me, pure, unlimited, unconditioned awareness. It is the ground and center of my being, it is being itself.

Could it be that one part of my mind watches another? This isn't a satisfactory answer. It still leaves us saddled with the same question, but with added complications. If one part of my mind serves as witness, watching the act of perception, who or what is it that is aware of this watching? If I hypothesize a third part of the mind to watch the second, I begin to sink into a quicksand of consciousness. Ultimately, we would end up with countless mind-parts watching each other. If this were true, rational thought would be complete chaos, and I would have no reliable place to store memory where it could be accessed. It would be like living in a house with infinite closets. How could I ever find the winter gloves I put away last Spring?

There must be some part of us, deep, subtle, and unchanging, that simply witnesses. This witness is the Self, pure consciousness.

Sat - Chit - Ananda

The Self is Pure Consciousness, and although it is the source and substance of all creation, it is not limited to Creation. It is unknowable by reason, though it doesn't contradict it. Still, our minds look for words that can point us in the general direction of this highest reality. There are three words that have traditionally been used to contemplate the Self: *sat – chit – ananda*, existence, knowledge, bliss.

Our understanding of this threefold designation starts with existence, *sat*. I exist. You exist. Your cat exists. Your doormat exists. Figments of our imagination exist. Existence is the common factor at the core of every material, energetic, and psychological reality in the universe. The Self is existence itself.

The next word is, *chit*, knowledge or awareness. It suggests to us that the nature of existence is awareness. Not awareness *of* something, to be aware of something means that consciousness would be limited. If awareness were restricted to objects and events only, it would be also limited by time and space. The flower and I must share the same time and space for me to catch its fragrance. But *chit* should be understood, and can be experienced as having no limitations. but as the essence of everything - the only ingredient in objects and events in the universe.

Pondering such subtle truths as existence and awareness may make them seem remote, but they are not. They are the most intimate of all realities. Consider this: every thought, every sentence we speak, every action, is based on the presence of both existence and awareness. It's reflected in our everyday language as, "I am." "*I am* a child. "*I am* a young adult". "*I am* old."

"I am" not only expresses both existence and awareness, it affirms the profound truth about who we are: we are existence or being itself and the most fundamental nature of existence is awareness.

The third word in this three-word formula is *ananda*, usually translated as bliss. Bliss defines the goal of spiritual life: unchanging, unbounded bliss.

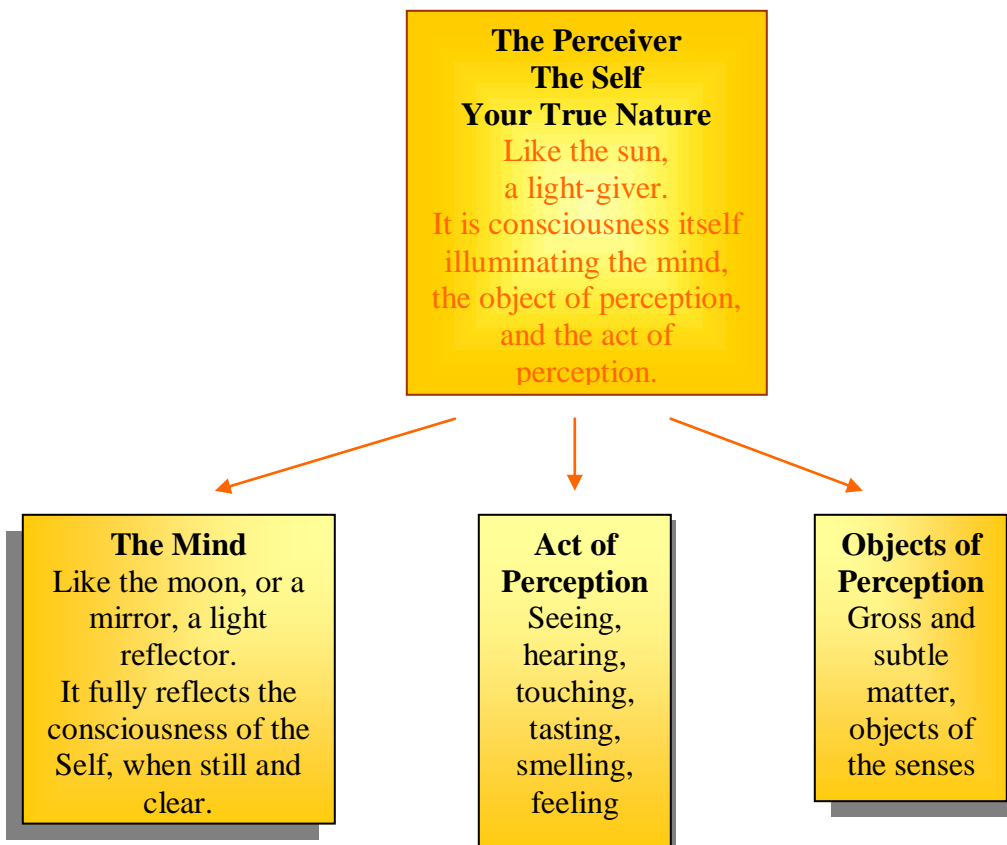
Ananda is not just a super-happy state. It can never be the result of getting all the things we want in life, no matter how grand. Ananda suggest fullness, completeness, the lack of nothing. It is not an excited state of happiness, like being the guest of honor at a incredible surprise party. Ananda is what we experience as the culmination of human existence. On a relative level, all of creation is moving, inextricably, invariably toward ananda; to a fulfilling and completely satisfying end state – the closure of all closures. For us, that means Self-realization, enlightenment, the end of all our suffering.

Ananda is the most natural of all experiences. It is what we have been looking for forever. Not an emotion, it is something vaguely like returning to the comfort, familiarity, and security of home after countless lifetimes of struggle. It is our source. It is where we belong. It is where every fiber of our being knows pure rest that no suffering can invade or disturb.

Sat – chit – ananda. That is who we are. Our Self is being itself, it is awareness, and it is the state of complete fulfillment.

The Jnana Yoga Path to Self-realization

The Self cannot be shrunk to fit the mind. It cannot be grasped by logic. But it can be reflected in a peaceful clear, and one-pointed mind. This is the same principle that Jesus expressed as, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” The great sage, Patanjali teaches the same truth in different words: “Stillness of mind is Yoga. Then we rest in our True Nature.” Know the knower and be free. Now we can correct our perception diagram to more accurately represent the truth.



The above diagram shows that it is the Self – not the mind - that is the perceiver and that It illumines the mind as well as the entire process of perception.

The Self can never be the object of perception since it is always the perceiver. It makes perception possible by appearing as the names and forms of Nature and by shining its awareness on the mind. The mind, itself a part of Nature, has no awareness of its own. Its consciousness is “borrowed” from the Self just as the light of the moon is “borrowed” from the Sun.

A clean, undistorted mirror, can reflect the Self in all its fullness, just as a raindrop can reflect the entire globe of the sun. When we meditate, we turn our minds away from the *objects* of perception and the *process* of meditation, to the unchanging awareness within that has been illuminating our minds all along.

At the beginning of this article, we experimented with a bit of Jnana Yoga style meditation. It was a form of self-analysis based on answering of questions, such as “Am I my body.” The asking of these questions and the examination of “stock” answers is very useful, but does not express the deeper levels of Jnana meditation. As the mind probes the depths of anything it focuses on. Over time, as the meditation progresses, deeper, new vistas emerge. Subtler questions present themselves. “Who is it that’s asking these questions? What part of me is asking, and what part is aware of the asking? Where do these questions come from, anyway?”

The focus of attention gradually and naturally shifts to awareness itself. At this point, the jnani goes beyond the question and answer exercise and begins to cultivate a state of mind that is completely silent and receptive. The mind becomes an intense, alert, unwavering listener, patiently observing consciousness. Gradually the intuitive truths that precede thoughts, words, and images are revealed. It is a way of knowing that is direct, intuitive, and transcendent. Ultimately, the perceiver – the Self - stands alone, unfettered and unconditioned. That is what is called enlightenment.

The jnani has gone from questioning to observation. The mind continues its exploration, going deeper and deeper until it has reached the limits of reason. The mind has surrendered all conceptions of life and self and has become absorbed in the Self, Self-realization. It’s something like hearing about the delicious taste and texture of a banana all our lives. Our strongest wish is to taste it. We study, meditate, and imagine the greatness of a banana, but we can’t know it until we experience it. When we finally take our first bite, it is not an experience governed by logic or philosophy. It is pure and direct. Only when we have this direct taste can we say we know a banana. The same is true for the Self. It needs to be tasted.

The path of Jnana Yoga is certainly not limited to this form of meditation or self-analysis. Jnanis’ minds are continually on the search for what is changeless within what changes. They strive to have the mind in the present and free from biases. The jnani’s mind - patient, clear and strong - doesn’t jump to conclusions, but considers every aspect of a situation before acting. When problems or conflicts arise, they look to themselves first to find how they have contributed to uncomfortable or unproductive behaviors or situations. Their minds remain open and humble, always seeking to learn and grow. They carefully study sacred texts and observe nature, seeking to uncover the reason behind anxieties and fears as well as understand the source of joy and peace. Since

no philosophy or set of beliefs can contain the Self, the jnani respects every path as valid and as a source of knowledge and inspiration.

Jnana Yoga, Karma Yoga, and Bhakti Yoga: Incompatible?

It might seem that the path of Jnana Yoga is pure intellect – a path of emotionless Yoga where the intellect and learning provide certainty and clarity. This is far from the truth on several levels. First, is that the path of Jnana Yoga is *not* marked primarily by collecting or constructing clear, unchanging principles and mountains of quotes from many sacred texts. Instead, it is a process of breaking down the certainties held by the mind. Second, not only is there no discrepancy between Jnana Yoga and the devotion of Bhakti Yoga and the selfless service of Karma Yoga - they complement each other.

The danger of Jnana Yoga is that when our minds think that they have solved the puzzles of life and have arrived at enlightenment, all we have accomplished is the replacing one faulty concept with another. It might be a more refined concept, but concepts however lofty, are not reality. Pure intellect alone often leaves us with ideas of self and life that are false or incomplete. Intellect needs to be challenged, refined, and tested. That's where Bhakti and Karma Yoga come in.

Although it is not necessary to believe in God to practice Jnana Yoga, prayer and worship can form a vital part of the practices of a jnani. With a clear understanding of the power and use of symbols, and knowing the mind's need to reach out beyond the confines of everyday life to connect with a transcendent reality, the jnani can profit by devotional practice. Practices such as prayer, chanting, and worship help lift the mind out of ingrained ways of thinking and being. Devotion should be understood as another way of learning and knowing.

Karma Yoga, the Yoga of selfless service, is how we test and refine ourselves. There is no substitute for the learning gained through mindfully engaging in the experiences in our lives while trying to do good without expectation of any personal reward. We can believe in generosity, but how do we know how deeply this virtue has settled into our hearts until we are faced with a temptation to abandon it? We can believe that we love everyone, but how strong that love is remains unknown to us until we are faced with someone who pushes all our buttons. Emotions like disappointment, confusion, and anxiety are powerful indicators that we are not yet established in the realization of the Oneness of the Self. These disturbing feelings nudge us out of complacency and point to where our limitations lie.

Come Home

The Self is called our *True* Nature because it is changeless. Whenever we look to anything that changes for happiness, we will be disappointed one day or other. We put forth effort to find fulfillment in possessions, name, and fame, but it never really works. What we gain doesn't provide the anticipated fulfillment. Sometimes it does but only for a while. Other times what we have gained may change in an unsatisfactory way, or we may change, either way, the happiness vanishes. Things that are by nature, transitory simply are not capable of giving us unshakable happiness.

Yet, this material universe is not the enemy of happiness. On the contrary, it is our teacher and friend. It exists to teach us that it cannot give us the permanent happiness we seek. Once we understand the limitations that the world can provide, we can grow beyond

them. The paradox is that it is only when we know the limitations of what the world can give, can we truly enjoy it.

The experience of your True Self erases suffering. It brings harmony and joy. Self-realization becomes a boon to all those around us.

Discover the Self, today, now. Meditate, contemplate, analyze, pray, chant, study sacred texts, and lovingly serve others. When the mind is quiet, the heart pure, you will have direct experience of the Self.

Right now - and always – your Self calls to you in a whisper that thunders the message of the end of suffering. Heed the call and come home.