

# From Īśvara-Praṇidhāna to Parā-Bhakti: Convergent Paths of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga and Bhakti Yoga

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersection of **Aṣṭāṅga Yoga**, as codified in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*, and **Bhakti Yoga**, as developed in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra*, and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Traditionally considered distinct—one emphasizing discipline and isolation (*kaivalya*), the other devotion and union (*prema-bhakti*)—these systems nonetheless converge at the practical level. Drawing on hermeneutical analysis and comparative theology, this study advances a **Convergent-Pragmatic Thesis**: that Aṣṭāṅga Yoga provides a disciplined framework for purifying mind and body, while Bhakti Yoga supplies a devotional orientation that sustains surrender and love. The bridging concept is *īśvara-praṇidhāna* (devotion to Īśvara) in Patañjali and *śaraṇāgati* (surrender) in Bhakti traditions, both of which function as transformative practices.

By analyzing the eight limbs of yoga alongside the bhakti traditions, this paper demonstrates how yogic discipline can be “devotionalized,” and how devotional practice can be strengthened by yogic discipline. Historical reception shows that medieval commentators, modern reformers, and contemporary global yoga often integrate both. While ontological and soteriological divergences remain—*kaivalya* as isolation versus *mokṣa* as communion—the two paths emerge as complementary, offering both rigor and heart to the spiritual journey. This convergence has significant implications for comparative theology and for contemporary yoga pedagogy, where the need to reintegrate discipline with devotion is increasingly urgent.

**Keywords:** Yoga Sūtra, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Īśvara-praṇidhāna, Śaraṇāgati, Kaivalya, Bhagavad-Gītā

## INTRODUCTION

Yoga in the Indian tradition encompasses diverse approaches to liberation. Among these, **Aṣṭāṅga Yoga** and **Bhakti Yoga** stand out as disciplined and devotional paths respectively. Aṣṭāṅga, the eightfold method presented in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra* (c. 4th century CE), emphasizes ethical discipline, concentration, and meditative absorption culminating in *kaivalya*, the isolation of pure consciousness from material nature (*prakṛti*). Bhakti Yoga, articulated in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra*, and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, centers on devotion and surrender to Bhagavān, culminating in loving communion.

Although scholarship has often treated them as separate systems—Yoga as a discipline of interiority, Bhakti as a religion of emotion—both converge at the point of **surrender**. Patañjali prescribes *īśvara-praṇidhāna* (surrender to Īśvara) as a means to *śamādhi* (YS I.23, II.45), while the *Gītā* insists on *śaraṇāgati* (BG 18.66) as the essence of liberation. This commonality suggests a convergence of methods, even while ultimate goals differ.

This paper therefore advances a **Convergent-Pragmatic Thesis**: Aṣṭāṅga Yoga and Bhakti Yoga can be viewed as mutually supportive disciplines. Aṣṭāṅga provides structure; Bhakti provides orientation. The analysis proceeds in eight parts: methodology, exposition of Aṣṭāṅga and Bhakti, comparison of surrender practices, ontology and soteriology, praxis mapping, reception history, and final synthesis.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a **hermeneutical-comparative method**, analyzing Sanskrit sources with attention to commentarial traditions, and placing them in dialogue. Primary sources include the *Yoga Sūtra* (with Vyāsa Bhāṣya), the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra*, and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Secondary sources include Bryant (2009), Chapple (2013), Larson (1995), White (2014), Flood (1996), and Pechilis (1999).

The analysis is not empirical but theoretical. It does not attempt to reconcile divergent metaphysics, but to show their **practical convergence** in methods of discipline and devotion.

### Classical Aṣṭāṅga Yoga

Patañjali lists eight limbs: yama (restraints), niyama (observances), āsana (posture), prāṇāyāma (breath regulation), pratyāhāra (sense withdrawal), dhāraṇā (concentration), dhyāna (meditation), and samādhi (absorption) (YS II.29). The goal is **kaivalya** (YS IV.34), the isolation of *puruṣa* from *prakṛti*.

Yet devotion is embedded in this system. Īśvara is defined as a “special *puruṣa*” untouched by karma or affliction (YS I.24). Surrender to Īśvara is prescribed as a direct path to samādhi (YS I.23, II.45). Recitation of praṇava (*Oṃ*) and meditation on its meaning (YS I.27–28) integrate mantra with devotion. Thus, although dualistic, Yoga retains a **devotional axis**.

### Bhakti Yoga in Śāstra

The *Bhagavad-Gītā* elevates bhakti above all yogas: “*yoginām api sarveṣāṃ ... sa me yuktatamo mataḥ*” (BG 6.47). Chapter 12 describes qualities of a bhakta (BG 12.13–20), while 18.66 proclaims surrender (*śaraṇāgati*) as the essence of salvation.

The *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra* defines bhakti as supreme love (*parama-prema-rūpā*, NBS 2), both path and goal (NBS 82). The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* outlines ninefold devotion (*navadhā-bhakti*), including hearing, chanting, worship, and surrender (7.5.23–24). Liberation here is not isolation but loving communion with Bhagavān.

### Īśvara-Praṇidhāna as Bridge

Both systems converge on **surrender**. Patañjali prescribes *īśvara-praṇidhāna* as *kriyā-yoga* (YS II.1), *niyama* (YS II.32), and means to samādhi (YS II.45). The *Gītā* prescribes *śaraṇāgati* (18.66) as the highest command. The *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra* emphasizes exclusivity (*ananyatā*, NBS 19), echoing Yoga’s focus on single-pointedness.

Thus, though theistic in different ways, both traditions affirm surrender as **indispensable for transformation**, functioning as a shared practice of ego-transcendence and reliance on divine grace.

### Ontology and Soteriology

Ontology diverges sharply. Yoga affirms dualism: multiple *puruṣas* and *prakṛti*, liberation as *kaivalya* (YS IV.34). Bhakti affirms theism: one supreme Bhagavān, *jīvas* dependent on Him, liberation as loving communion (BG 7.7, Bhāg. 11.14.20).

Soteriology also diverges: Yoga culminates in isolation, Bhakti in relational union. Yet both converge in emphasizing purification, discipline, and surrender as indispensable stages.

While Patañjali’s system tends toward Sāṅkhya dualism, later commentators like Bhoja (11th c.) and the Vaiṣṇava Vedāntins interpret Īśvara as a personal deity, thus reorienting *kaivalya* toward communion rather than isolation. Advaitic readers, by contrast, internalize Īśvara as the Self. Such lineage-based divergences highlight that the Convergent-Pragmatic Thesis is interpretively situated rather than universally prescriptive.

## Praxis Mapping: Devotionalizing the Eight Limbs

Each limb of Aṣṭāṅga can be devotionalized:

- **Yama/Niyama:** ethical restraints as service to God; *īśvara-praṇidhāna* aligns directly with bhakti.
- **Āsana:** body as offering in worship.
- **Prāṇāyāma:** breath as remembrance, linked to *nāma-japa*.
- **Pratyāhāra:** withdrawal of senses for devotion.
- **Dhāraṇā/Dhyāna:** single-pointed remembrance of God's form and name.
- **Samādhi:** absorption—either in pure consciousness or in God's presence.

Thus, discipline and devotion can mutually reinforce, each enriching the other's praxis.

## Reception and Modern Re-readings

Commentaries show increasing devotional integration. Vyāsa emphasized *īśvara-praṇidhāna* as optional aid; Bhoja equated Īśvara with Viṣṇu. Vaiṣṇava traditions reinterpreted Yoga as bhakti-sādhana.

Modern figures continued this integration. Vivekananda presented Rāja and Bhakti Yoga as complementary. Aurobindo fused them into Integral Yoga. ISKCON appropriated yogic vocabulary into bhakti-centered practice. Global yoga today often blends āsana with chanting and devotion.

## Pedagogical Implications for Contemporary Yoga Education

Contemporary yoga pedagogy can benefit from integrating the ethical, meditative, and devotional strands of both systems. Curriculum design may include modules that pair yama-niyama with reflective practices of surrender (*praṇidhāna*), āsana-prāṇāyāma with chanting or *nāma-japa*, and dhyāna with meditations on compassion or divine presence. Such balance nurtures both inner discipline and relational devotion, making yoga education holistic rather than technique-driven.

## CONCLUSION

Yoga and Bhakti, though divergent in metaphysics, are convergent in practice. Yoga provides **discipline and purification**; Bhakti provides **orientation and grace**. Their convergence is not doctrinal but pragmatic: both insist on surrender, both transform ego into receptivity to transcendence.

Thus, the two may be seen as **wings of the same bird**—discipline without devotion is dry, devotion without discipline is unstable. Together, they offer a holistic path balancing rigor and love, method and surrender.

This has implications for comparative theology, pedagogy, and interfaith dialogue: Yoga is not merely technique, Bhakti not mere emotion—they are complementary technologies of liberation.

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