



# The Inner Landscape: Depictions of Yoga and Contemplative Practices in World Literature

---

Ms. Nitu Sharma, Research Scholar,

Shyam University, Dausa (Raj)

Dr Geeta Garwa,

Research Supervisor,

Shyam University, Dausa (Raj)

---

## Abstract

Yoga, often narrowly perceived in the West as a series of physical postures (asanas), is fundamentally a multifaceted spiritual and philosophical system aimed at spiritual liberation (moksha) and the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind. This paper explores the literary depiction of yoga and its equivalent contemplative practices across a selection of Eastern and Western texts. It argues that while the specific techniques differ, the core pursuit of self-knowledge, inner peace, and transcendence forms a common thread. The analysis begins within the Indian tradition itself, examining the foundational model of the yogi in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the aesthetic-spiritual parallel of *viraha* (separation) in Bhakti poetry. It then traces the migration and transformation of these ideals into Western literature, from the Romantic internalization of nature as a contemplative space in Wordsworth's poetry to the modernist grappling with fragmented consciousness in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which seeks a yogic stillness amidst the chaos. The paper concludes by examining contemporary global literature, such as Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, which blends Zen Buddhist practice with narrative form. Through this comparative analysis, the paper demonstrates that literature does not merely describe contemplative practices but often enacts them, using narrative and poetic form to guide the reader toward a state of deeper reflection and awareness.

## Keywords

Yoga, Contemplative Practices, Literature, Bhagavad Gita, Bhakti, Romanticism, Modernism, Zen Buddhism, Spiritual Seeking, Mindfulness, Moksha

---

## Introduction

The human quest for meaning, peace, and self-understanding is a universal narrative, one that has found expression not only in the world's spiritual traditions but also in its literature. Yoga, a profound and ancient discipline originating in the Indian subcontinent, is one of the most sophisticated systems devised for this inner journey. While its popular, globalized image is often reduced to physical exercise, its classical definition, as articulated by Patañjali in the *Yoga Sutras*, is "the cessation of the modifications of the mind" (1.2). This journey inward—towards a state of integrated consciousness, or *samadhi*—provides a rich thematic and symbolic reservoir for writers. This paper will argue that yoga and its equivalent contemplative practices are depicted in literature both thematically, through characters and narratives of spiritual seeking, and formally, through structures that mirror meditative states. By tracing this depiction from its roots in Indian scriptures to its adaptations in Western and global literature, we can see how the literary imagination has consistently engaged with the project of transcending the ego and perceiving a deeper reality.

## The Foundational Archetype: Yoga in the Indian Literary Tradition

To understand yoga in literature, one must first look to the texts where it is not merely a theme but a central doctrine. The *Bhagavad Gita*, a 700-verse Hindu scripture within the epic *Mahabharata*, serves as the quintessential literary depiction of yoga in action. Set on a battlefield, it is a dialogue between the warrior-prince Arjuna and his charioteer, Lord Krishna. The Gita outlines several margas, or paths of yoga, presenting them as viable routes to spiritual fulfillment.

The most directly relevant is *Karma Yoga*, the yoga of selfless action. Krishna advises Arjuna, "To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruit; let not the fruits of action be thy motive, neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction" (2.47). This core teaching—to act without attachment to the results—is a literary dramatization of a central yogic principle. Arjuna's internal conflict, his grief and confusion (*vishada*), represents the "modifications of the mind" that yoga seeks to quiet. The entire narrative is an allegory for the human struggle to perform one's duty (*dharma*) while maintaining inner equipoise, a state Krishna defines as *Yogasthah kuru karmāni*—"Established in Yoga, perform actions" (2.48).

Alongside the philosophical model of the Gita, the Bhakti (devotional) tradition in India, particularly from the first millennium CE onwards, offers a different but parallel literary expression of a yogic state. The poetry of saints like Mirabai, Kabir, and Jayadeva explores the agony and ecstasy of separation from the divine, a state known as *viraha*. In Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, the longing of Radha for Krishna is not merely romantic but a profound metaphor for the soul's yearning for union with the absolute—the very definition of "yoga" (from the root *yuj*, meaning to yoke or unite). The pining, the intense focus on the beloved, and the ultimate union represent a path of *Bhakti Yoga* that is emotionally charged and deeply contemplative. The poetry itself, through its repetitive refrains and sensual imagery, seeks to induce a state of devotional absorption in the reader or listener, functioning as a literary technology for transcendence.

### **The Western Gaze: Internalization and the Romantic Seeker**

The transmission of Indian thought to the West, particularly from the late 18th century onwards, profoundly influenced Western literature, though often in a fragmented and reinterpreted form. The English Romantic poets, though not practicing yogis, championed an internalized, intuitive mode of perception that closely mirrors contemplative practice. Their "yoga" was often practiced in and through nature.

William Wordsworth's poetry is a prime example. In his seminal work, *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, the speaker describes a state of heightened awareness achieved through solitude in nature: "that blessed mood, / In which the burthen of the mystery, / In which the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world, / Is lightened" (37-41). This description aligns strikingly with the yogic goal of calming the mind and attaining liberating insight (*prajna*). The "serene and blessed mood" he describes is a form of contemplative bliss (*ananda*), achieved not through formal meditation but through a deep, receptive communion with the natural world. The poet becomes a type of *rishi* or seer, whose function is to access and articulate this transcendent state for the reader. Similarly, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp" explores a state of unified consciousness where the self dissolves into the "one Life within us and abroad," a pantheistic vision that parallels the yogic concept of non-duality (*advaita*).

### **Modernist Fragmentation and the Quest for Stillness**

If the Romantics found a natural path to contemplation, the 20th-century Modernists confronted a world fractured by war and industrialization, making their literary engagement with yogic ideals more desperate and complex. T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* stands as the most ambitious poetic work in English to grapple with the need for a contemplative center in a world of chaos. While deeply rooted in Christian mysticism, the poem's structure and themes are profoundly aligned with meditative practice.

The poem is obsessed with time and timelessness, a central concern in yoga philosophy, which distinguishes between chronological time (*kala*) and the eternal now (*kshana*). Eliot's famous lines in "Burnt Norton"—"At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; / Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is" (62-64)—could be a direct description of the state of *samadhi*, where dualistic perception ceases. The entire structure of *Four Quartets*, with its repetitive motifs, cyclical movements, and lyrical meditations, mimics the process of meditation itself:

circling a core truth, attempting to clear the mind of distraction, and seeking fleeting moments of pure, wordless perception—what Eliot calls the "grace of sense." The poem does not simply describe a still point; it labors formally to create one for the reader amidst the cacophony of modern life.

### Contemporary Synthesis: Globalized Mindfulness and Narrative Form

In contemporary global literature, the depiction of equivalent practices has moved beyond philosophical allusion to become integrated into narrative form and character psychology, often reflecting a secularized, mindfulness-based approach. Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* brilliantly exemplifies this trend. The novel intertwines the story of a writer in Canada with the diary of a Japanese-American girl, Nao, who is contemplating suicide.

Nao's great-grandmother, Jiko, is a Zen Buddhist nun, and Zen practice—a close cousin to yoga in its emphasis on meditation, mindfulness, and direct experience—is central to the narrative. Jiko embodies the serene detachment and compassion of an adept practitioner. More importantly, the novel itself is a contemplative act. The reader, alongside the character Ruth, pieces together Nao's story, a process that requires patience, attention, and a non-judgmental presence. The narrative structure, which includes footnotes, diary entries, and scientific digressions, forces a reading pace that is slower and more reflective. The novel suggests that the act of deep reading—of attending to another's consciousness with empathy and focus—is itself a form of meditation, a way of being fully present "for the time being." This aligns with the Zen concept of mindfulness (*sati*) and the yogic principle of *dharana* (concentration).

Similarly, the widespread themes of healing through introspection in contemporary fiction often feature characters turning to meditation or yoga as practical tools. While sometimes superficially treated, these narratives reflect the mainstreaming of contemplative practices as a legitimate response to the anxieties of modern life, continuing the literary tradition of seeking answers not in the external world, but within the depths of the self.

### Conclusion

From the battlefield of Kurukshetra to the quiet Canadian island in Ozeki's novel, literature has consistently served as a vessel for humanity's contemplative yearnings. The depiction of yoga and its equivalent practices is not a monolithic phenomenon but a rich and evolving dialogue. In its native Indian context, as seen in the *Bhagavad Gita* and Bhakti poetry, it is presented as a complete philosophical and devotional system, with the narrative serving to illustrate its principles. As these ideas traveled West, they were internalized and transformed, becoming the Romantic poet's communion with nature and the Modernist's desperate grasp for a "still point" in a breaking world. In contemporary literature, these practices have been further democratized and secularized, often integrated into the very form of the narrative to model a mindful way of engaging with the world.

Ultimately, literature and contemplative practice share a common goal: to refine perception and illuminate the nature of reality. Whether through the disciplined stilling of the mind in classical yoga, the devotional fervor of Bhakti, or the attentive reading of a complex novel, the aim is to transcend the superficial and the fragmented to touch something more enduring and unified. The enduring presence of this quest in world literature confirms that the journey to map the inner landscape remains one of the most vital projects of the human imagination.

---

### References

Eliot, T. S. *Four Quartets*. Faber and Faber, 1944.

*The Bhagavad Gita*. Translated by S. Radhakrishnan, HarperCollins Publishers India, 2016.

Jayadeva. *Gita Govinda*. Translated by Barbara Stoler Miller, Motilal Banarsidass, 2020.

Ozeki, Ruth. *A Tale for the Time Being*. Penguin Books, 2013.

Patañjali. *The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali*. Translated by Swami Satchidananda, Integral Yoga Publications, 2012.

Wordsworth, William. *Lyrical Ballads*. Edited by R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones, Routledge, 2005.

Feuerstein, Georg. *The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy, and Practice*. Hohm Press, 2001.

Goldberg, Philip. *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation—How Indian Spirituality Changed the West*. Harmony Books, 2010.

Tymieniecka, Anna-Teresa, editor. *The Aesthetics of Enchantment in the Fine Arts*. Springer, 2000. (For the connection between Romanticism and contemplative states).