

Yoga and the Christian Faith

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I was born a Hindu, became a Christian at the age of 22 and have been an Orthodox Christian for ten years. I was brought up with yoga. My grandfather was a friend of one of the founders of modern yoga, Swami Sivananda, who used to send his books on yoga to my grandfather along with a vitamin-rich sweet herbal concoction we loved to eat. As children we were encouraged to do certain postures and breathing exercises, always with a clear warning that there are different ways of breathing for men and women as their bodies are differently shaped. When I got married and had children, I passed on to them some of the ideas I had found useful from my childhood yoga lessons. We lived on top of a hill, and as the children walked daily to school (we



did not have a car), they had to climb up a steep incline. At times, they would complain about how their legs hurt. I would say, without thinking for one moment how odd it might sound, “breathe through your knees.” Somehow they seemed to understand what that meant and did as told, and soon found it less of an effort to climb. Later on, as they grew up, they learnt to do postures from modern western manuals and benefit from the exercises. They were brought up in a Christian home and were in no danger of being led astray by esoteric Hindu spiritual ideas, such as “self-realization”, which often accompany modern yoga. On a visit to India, when they met such ideas in an ashram, they were rather repelled by them as they were by the idolatrous, cultic atmosphere that prevailed in that ashram.

I recount this chiefly to emphasize that there is more to yoga than mere exercise and that we need, more than ever, the gift of discernment when we attend yoga classes or read about it in books. We need to have a clear idea of what we are dealing with if we want to use it without compromising our Christian faith.

Yoga was once regarded with awe in India as an esoteric branch of Hindu spiritual discipline that required great physical and psychological daring. It was sought by the solitary spiritual seeker eager to ascend the higher rungs of a Hindu ideal of spiritual perfection. Such a seeker would undertake an austere regimen of physical and mental discipline strictly under the guidance of a revered master, a guru of spiritual discernment who would monitor his disciple’s progress vigilantly. The ultimate goal of yoga was nothing short of experiencing the divine within oneself.

Since the nineteenth century, largely due to the relentless propaganda efforts of Hindu missionary gurus such as Swami Vivekananda, yoga has been stripped of its mystique and complexity. It has been remoulded in the idiom of American schools of self-help and positive thinking and marketed as a safe and easy pathway to bliss within the grasp of all. Both in the East and West, yoga is now a household word; a highly popular keep-fit routine taught and practiced by large numbers in church or school halls and sports-venues. While some yoga teachers promote it as a mere technique for ensuring one’s wellbeing, others advocate it as an all-purpose answer to

not only the ills of modern life but to the ultimate questions of life itself. Some yoga teachers and students play down the importance of the Hindu ethos in which the psycho-spiritual jargon of yoga is anchored, others eagerly embrace that very ethos, especially those who find the creeds, rituals and demands of institutional Christianity irksome. Many Christians practice yoga untroubled by its spiritual baggage while others feel some unease, and often meet with disapproval from their priests and bishops.

As Orthodox Christians, what are we to make of modern yoga?

Is yoga safe for Christians to practice? Or, is it so counter to the Christian faith as to be shunned totally? The conundrum posed by modern yoga was brought into sharp focus by a report in *TheTimes* (Friday, 31 August, 2007) which caused a stir. “Vicars ban unchristian yoga for toddlers” so ran the headline: “A children’s exercise class has been banned from two church-halls because it is teaching yoga. The group has been turned away by vicars who described yoga as a sham and unchristian.” The slant given in the report seemed to suggest that the vicars were being unreasonable, bigoted and unduly alarmist. The yoga teacher Miss Woodcock is said to have been “outraged” by their ban on her “Yum-Yum Yoga class for toddlers and mums”. She claims that she explained to the church that her “yoga is a completely non-religious activity.” She does, however, concede that “some types of adult-yoga are based on Hindu and Buddhist meditation but it is not part of the religion and there is no dogma involved.”

“**Exercise**”, not “**meditation**”: in saying this, this yoga teacher is drawing our attention to the two major types of yoga prevalent today: Modern Postural Yoga and Modern Meditational Yoga. Realizing that meditational yoga often takes one deep into spiritual realms and goals incompatible with Christianity, Miss Woodcock is eager to keep “exercise” apart from “meditation.” Is such a defusing of yoga to make it “safe” possible?

The vicars disagree: “The philosophy of yoga cannot be separated from the practice of it, and any teacher of yoga (even to toddlers) must subscribe to the philosophy. Yoga may appear harmless or even beneficial, but it is encouraging people to think that there is a way to wholeness of body and mind through human techniques—whereas the only true way to wholeness is by faith in God through Jesus Christ.”

Any reliance solely on “human techniques” for achieving wholeness divorced from faith in Jesus Christ is understandably castigated by the vicars, one an Anglican and the other, a Baptist. Their rejection stems from a fear of nullifying the role of faith and grace in salvation and of falling into the heresy of Pelagianism. Protestant tradition in general tends to be nervous of any suggestion of “spiritual effort” despite the fact that St. Paul admonishes us to “work out our salvation with diligence”.

The concept of synergy

In the Orthodox tradition the role of human freewill in responding to the divine call to “wholeness” or “holiness” is beautifully encapsulated in the concept of *synergy*. The Incarnation of Christ as fully human and fully God means that we now have a way through Him for what St. Maximus calls divine-human “reciprocity”. God becoming human makes possible our participation in His life, a lifelong process which is described as *theosis* (deification). Our salvation is not an automatic result of an initial assent, or a legal status of being redeemed from our “slavery” to sin but an “active perfection” in love to be realized in the body of Christ, in his Church.

Therefore baptized Christians are urged to fast, pray, give alms, repent, confess, participate in the life and liturgy of the Church; all these require an initiative on our part, a willingness to prepare ourselves to receive and respond to the grace of God. Like the Prodigal Son, remembering God, “Our Father,” means setting our heart towards our journey home back to Him. There is a subtle symbiosis between human readiness or willingness and the work of the Holy Spirit. To adopt a telling image from St. Ephraim, the human person is a “harp of the Spirit.” To play well the music of the Holy Spirit our harp needs to be well tuned, its strings neither too tight nor too slack. Yoga techniques are primarily aimed at achieving a psychosomatic equilibrium or poise. So we may well ask, without falling into any heresy, is it not possible to treat yoga-techniques as means “to tune up” our body and mind so that we become better receptors of God’s grace? Can Hindu yoga help a Christian to fulfill the command heard by the psalmist “Be still and know that I am God?” What role, if any, can yoga postures and meditation play in fulfilling the commands of Christ : “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . Love your neighbour as yourself.”(Mathew 22: 37-39)?

The Hindu-Buddhist Ethos of Modern Yoga

Before I attempt to answer these questions I need to sketch in brief the types of yoga one encounters to day and the Hindu-Buddhist ethos they are steeped in. One writer cites four types: Hollywood Yoga, Harvard Yoga, Himalayan Yoga and Cultic Yoga.¹

1. Hollywood Yoga , as the name implies, aims at beauty, fitness and longevity.
2. Harvard Yoga sets its sights on mental clarity, concentration and psychic calm.
3. Himalayan Yoga goes way beyond the other two and aims at a mystical state known as *samadhi* (absorption).
4. Cultic Yoga centres round a charismatic guru. Enlightenment is said to be imparted by the mere touch of a guru to a disciple who worships him or her as God.

Purist Hindu practitioners claim to follow the guidelines provided in the original Sanskrit text, Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*; their teaching follows the “eight-limbed” (*ashtanga*) yoga. Doing postural exercises is a relatively minor matter in an agenda that lays stress on mental and moral purification and a harnessing of psychic powers for spiritual perfection. The “eight-limbs” consist of :

- “five restraints” (*yamas*)
- “five disciplines” (*niyamas*)
- “physical postures” (*asanas*)
- “regulation of vital force” (*pranayama*)
- “sense organ withdrawal” (*pratyahara*),
- “concentration” (*dharana*),
- “meditation” (*dhyana*)
- “absorption” (*samadhi*).

The first two “limbs” aim at cultivating virtues such as truthfulness, selflessness and non-violence. Some Hindu teachers of yoga regret that the third, “physical postures”, is now widely taught without any reference to moral perfection. They insist that the poise attained by the practice of postures is meant to set the yogi on a journey whose ultimate goal is spiritual, a state of permanent bliss known as *samadhi* or “absorption”.

¹ Ashok Kumar Malhotra, *An Introduction to Yoga Philosophy: an annotated translation of the Yoga Sutras*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2001, p. 15

Absorption into what?

This meets with different answers depending on what you believe.

If you are a Hindu who believes that there is no difference between his Self(*atma*) and the Supreme Self (*brahman*), “absorption” means arriving at an experience of undifferentiated oneness with *brahman*. Such a Hindu sees the ultimate spiritual reality as Impersonal and strongly contends that belief in the Impersonal is superior to any belief in a Personal God.

If you are a Hindu who worships God as a deity, a theist who cultivates a personal relationship of love with his or her god or goddess, and seeks liberation by the deity’s grace, “absorption” means a drowning of self in the Godhead.

If you are a Buddhist and do not believe in a Creator-God (as the Dalai Lama reiterates often) “absorption”, means entering *nirvana*, a “blowing out”, an ultimate extinction of self.

Though the ambitious spiritual program of Patanjali’s Yoga morphed into keep-fit routines in Western Yoga classes and manuals, one still meets some mutation or other of the complex, inter-dependent psycho-spiritual concepts from the original author. Underlying them all is the view derived from a system of philosophy known as *samkhya*. According to *samkhya*, our ordinary psychosomatic self is a byproduct of biophysical processes and that by the disciplines of yoga, one peels oneself like an onion to reach the core where one finds “pure consciousness.” As one yoga teacher explains: ‘once the individual grasps that he is essentially pure consciousness different from and separate from psychophysical processes, he is disunited from his false notions. At the same time the individual is also united in his thoughts, feelings, emotions and actions to his real self.’²

“Pure Consciousness” or Kingdom of God?

It seems a questionable claim that a systematic severing of contact with the external world creates an integrated human being. On the contrary, as R.D. Laing has shown in his *The Divided Self*, embarking on a radical withdrawal from external reality may well render one schizoid. Not only does the yogic inward journey runs the risk of mental illness, but the goal of such yoga raises some serious problems for a Christian. Jesus admonishes us to seek the Kingdom of God within, not “pure consciousness.” When a Christian prays, “Thy Kingdom come,” he is paradoxically envisaging the reign of God as an external as well as an internal happening. Even in the Christian monastic traditions, which recommend withdrawal from the world, from the objects of sensual experience, the monk is in search of an “inner kingdom” (cf. Metropolitan Kallistos’ choice title for his writings). In this “inner kingdom”, God the Holy Trinity, our God who has “revealed” Himself to us in Jesus Christ reigns supreme. We recognize Him and commune with Him in the power of the Holy Spirit and by the power of the same Spirit we call upon God as “Our Father.” In countless parables, Jesus describes what that phrase, the “Kingdom of God” means. Among other things it stands for a “life abundant” here and hereafter; and it encompasses the whole of creation. As Patriarch Ignatius IV reminds us, ‘The Kingdom of God is nothing other than the glorified Body of the risen Christ, in which each day humanity enters into communion.’³ The Christian goal of “the Kingdom of God” is a far cry from whatever one understands by “pure consciousness.”

² Ibid., p.4

³ Ignatius IV, Patriarch of Antioch, *The Resurrection and the Modern Man*, translated by Stephen Bingham, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York 1985, p. 71

Influential Hindu missionaries like Vivekananda and his followers deploy certain yoga techniques to promote a pop-mysticism based on the notion of “Self-realization,” which has become a yoga buzz-word. The path to “Self-realization” through yoga is presented as of universal appeal, free from dogma and strictly non-denominational. However, a close scrutiny of Vivekananda’s writings reveals a strong bias in favour of *one* specific Hindu tradition, that of the non-dualist, (*advaitin*) Vivekananda bowdlerized the subtle metaphysics of Hindu non-dualism (*advaita*) and championed its cause in the marketplace with the ardour of a philosophical imperialist. Random quotes from his writings illustrate his reckless syncretism and the audacious, often preposterous claims he made for his mode of “Self-realization.”⁴

“All is my Self. Say this unceasingly.”

“Go into your own room and get the Upanishads out of your own Self. You are the greatest book that ever was or ever will be, the infinite depository of all that is.”

“I am the essence of bliss” “Follow no ideal, you are all that is.”

“Christs and Buddhas are simply occasions upon which to objectify your inner powers. We really answer our own prayers.”

“We may call it Buddha, Jesus, Krishna, Jehovah, Allah, Agni, but it is only the Self, the ‘I’.”

“The universe is thought, and the Vedas are the words of this thought. We can create and uncreate the whole universe.”⁵

When Vivekananda realized that he needed something more than loose philosophical talk for his brand of “Self-realization,” he wrote his seminal work, *Raja Yoga*, which is a practical manual for those seeking the so-called “Self-realization.”

“Know thyself”: in Yoga and Christianity

There are many reasons why the spiritual ethos underpinning modern yoga is incompatible with Christianity, chief among them being the inordinate focus on self. Self-deification, from a Christian point of view, is at the very root of evil. In Christian understanding, the very Fall of Man is a turning away from God towards a misguided, rebellious reliance on self. This rupture of communion with God results in sin and death. Commenting on the Socratic dictum, “Know Thyself,” (which is also a message of modern yoga), Orthodox theologian Mantzaridis writes: ‘If there exists something that man can and must seek and find within himself, *it is not the self which deviated but the new man in Christ*, born through baptismal grace and the other Church sacraments. *Man’s return to himself can only truly exalt him provided it takes place within the life in Christ.*’⁶ The Christian goal and the means to that goal are succinctly put by the same author in his explication of St. Gregory Palamas: ‘Direct and personal knowledge of God is achieved through a mystical communion with Him. Man gains true knowledge of Him once he is visited by deifying grace and united through it with God. The more man accepts the divinizing transformation worked within him by the Holy Spirit, the more perfect and full is his knowledge of God.’⁷

⁴ For a informative and penetrating analysis of the hybrid origins of modern yoga see, Elizabeth DeMichelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* Continuum, London, 2004.

⁵ All these quotations from Vivekananda’s *Complete Works* cited above are from DeMichelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, pages 121-122.

⁶ George I Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, translated by Laidain Sherrard, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York, 1984. pp 82-83. Italics mine.

⁷ Ibid., p.114

St. Paul reminds us, to know God is to be known by him, that is, to be loved by Him. Love implies a relationship, a communion, not annihilation nor “absorption”, least of all “self-absorption”.

Christian Yoga?

Given that the spiritual ambience and goals of yoga, by and large, are incompatible with Christianity is there any way a Christian can disengage it from its Hindu ethos, use its techniques and still remain a committed Christian?

Some Christians believe that this is possible. A notable example is the Benedictine monk, Déchanet, who argues that yoga can do a great deal for Christians, well beyond improving our physical wellbeing. He believes that yoga can help us to be better Christians, provided we practice it within a framework of Christian prayer. In his book *Christian Yoga* Déchanet takes up the challenge of Christianizing yoga. This he does, with an acute awareness of the counter-Christian ethos of traditional yoga. He states emphatically how the two are dissimilar: ‘The Christian starts from faith, and reaches a certain experience, in divine charity, of the God of Revelation, experiencing “Emmanuel”, God with us, God with me. The Hindu has only empirical data to guide him and at the end of his road discovers a sublime but almost savage isolation.’⁸

Déchanet gives careful guidelines as to how one can do yoga to be a better Christian: in prayer, worship, in one’s love of God and love of one’s neighbour. He presents a set of yoga exercises and advice on breathing as ways of presenting ourselves to God with integrity and sincerity: ‘Our whole aim is to bring calm and peace to the whole being; to make a good and faithful servant of the body; to free the soul from anxieties and problems that are all too common; and to finally to arouse the spirit.’⁹

A Critique of Déchanet

I must confess to being somewhat troubled by that last phrase, “arouse the spirit”. This is the language of a Hindu yogi who believes in “arousing” dormant powers by masterful self-effort; and therefore it is not suitable to describe a Christian experience of the Spirit. Our Orthodox prayer to the Holy Spirit, “O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth . . .” makes it very clear that, as fallen creatures, what we need most urgently is an infusion of new life. So we *ask* to be cleansed and purified by Him who is “everywhere present and fills all things.” This prayer clearly positions us as *suplicants* seeking the Spirit’s abiding presence within us.

When I started work on this essay, I decided to test out Déchanet’s recommendations, and practiced some basic yoga postures during my morning prayers; and I found that with some conscious effort and concentration it was possible to synchronize my petitions, praise and thanks with the postures. It certainly curbed the level of anxiety, and I could tell myself that I was able to “consider the lilies of the field”, as our Lord commanded us to do, a little better than I normally do. The breathing exercises infused a sense of wellbeing and increased my ability to deal with the turmoil of the day.

However, there was one thing that troubled me somewhat in combining yoga with prayers. I found myself much more *aware of myself praying*. There was a degree of *self-consciousness* I felt uncomfortable with: I would rather have forgotten myself

⁸ Déchanet, *Christian Yoga*, London, Burns & Oates, 1956,1964, p.121

⁹ Ibid., p.85.

while saying the words of prayer or entering silence. Instead, I seemed to be watching myself praying. I decided that the sense of well being I had experienced was genuine enough but it was the result of the exercises, which were clearly beneficial. I decided to revert to my old habit of keeping the exercises separate from prayers.

My conclusion:

1. Incompatibility.

Christians undertaking yoga should be fully aware that its Hindu-Buddhist spiritual ethos is incompatible with the Christian faith. For example: even the Dalai Lama's commendable guidelines on cultivating compassion focus on "self-effort," for he frankly admits that he does not believe in a Creator God. For a Christian, love of one's neighbour (compassion) is inseparable from love of God, and, both are kindled in the human heart by the Holy Spirit.

If a yoga teacher introduces concepts and goals incompatible with being a Christian, one needs to resist them. For this one needs to have a good and clear grasp of what it means to be a Christian. If you are well grounded in Christian thinking, prayer and Christian living, it should be possible, by the grace of God to take what is good in yoga and discard its alien ethos. Attempts to Christianize yoga are commendable but may prove distracting.

2. Yoga to keep fit

It is perfectly feasible to use yoga as a keep-fit routine to tune the body, and make it a fit instrument for Christian prayer. We should be grateful that the modern teachers of yoga have reduced it to a gentle form of exercise.

3. Caution

I would, however, sound a note of caution. It is important to make sure that you are in normal health before you undertake postural yoga. A medical check-up is a good idea. For example, if you have blood-pressure problems certain postures should be avoided. Some postures stimulate the thyroid, and if you have any problems relating to that gland, again, you need to be careful. Some difficult postures like the headstand should be done only for short spells. One Indian guru, who rejects yoga, mocks its claim to enlightenment with the remark that too many headstands damage the finer blood vessels in the brain, even cause partial brain damage, and the consequent stupor is hailed by some Hindus as a state of enlightenment!

Even greater caution is necessary with what is taught as "meditation." Some advanced forms of meditation-exercises change one's brain rhythms and lead to a sense of euphoria, which can be addictive. As with other addictions, when the effect wears off, one may end up in depression.

4. Psychic Danger

Breathing techniques aimed at rousing what is called *kundalini*, dormant sexual energy, which is sublimated into spiritual energy, are particularly dangerous, as they expose one to psychic forces beyond one's control. Here it is well to remember Jesus' parable about the unclean spirit (Matthew 12: 43-45). A purified, heightened consciousness without the presence of God is a dangerous state to be in.

5. Mantras and Jesus Prayer

Some yoga teachers encourage chanting of mantras as a means of eliminating disturbance. Mantras are abbreviated invocation of Hindu deities; a mantra's sound

vibrations are said to activate unexplored levels of consciousness. Christians need no such mantras. Rather than enter unknown and potentially dangerous psychic realms through such chanting, we can stabilize ourselves by saying the Jesus Prayer. We have in the Jesus Prayer the most perfect invocation of the Divine Name, which we are called to “hallow,” that is hold holy. Moreover, our cry is grounded in a sober awareness of our own spiritual poverty as sin-prone creatures; hence, like the blind beggar we say, “Lord Jesus, Have mercy!”

Vocal or silent repetition of the name of Jesus acts like a mantra yet the Jesus Prayer is not a mantra. The Jesus prayer, unlike a mantra, contains in a nutshell the basics of the Christian faith. Unlike a mantra, which works more like self-hypnotism, the Jesus prayer marks a movement to and from God as it embodies a relationship in faith and love. Unlike Hindu mantras, whose ambit is what Christians would see as the “old Adam”, the ultimate aim of the Jesus Prayer is, to quote St. Paul, “to put on the new man.” In the writings of the Desert Fathers, of St. John of Damascus, especially in the hesychast tradition so soundly defended by St. Gregory Palamas, and in the works of modern commentators like Bishop Brianchaninov, Metropolitan Kallistos, monk Porphyrios we have invaluable guidelines for the practice of the Jesus Prayer. As Bishop Brianchaninov puts it, “In the name of the Lord Jesus quickening is given to the soul deadened by sin. The Lord Jesus Christ is life. And His name is living; it revives and quickens those who cry by it to the source of life.”¹⁰

Having sounded these warnings, I still believe that a modest yoga regimen can help us to stay supple in body and mind, spiritually alert and vigilant and ultimately live a Christian life with greater zest and joy. We can take our cue from the early Church Fathers. The Cappodocean Fathers were trained in pagan schools of rhetoric and logic but discarded the pagan ethos and deployed the techniques of their learning to brilliant effect in their Christian spiritual theology. Similarly, we too can deal with yoga without being swamped or led astray by its alien ethos, provided we entrust ourselves to Christ our Lord, and our God.

¹⁰ *On the Prayer of Jesus*, translated by Father Lazarus, London: John M. Watkins, 1965, p.27.