

Yoga in the Christian Perspective

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Abstract: Life has a great mission: it is to find God who is supreme bliss. The discovery of life and God is through yoga in Hinduism. Indian system of meditation through yoga helps to dissipate karma. Christian views on meditation and contemplation is that it integrates the inner self and united with the supreme God. Through contemplation and meditation, a Christian should be transformed and perform His will. On the contrary, yoga is not doing so as in the Christian method of contemplation and meditation. When the theory of yoga is translated into practice, yoga is simple. It demands curbing of our egoism, annihilation of selfishness and effective control of our mind and senses to function in tune with the infinite. The transformation of the human heart takes place by the process of social service, worship of God, inward contemplation, health giving physical posture and breathing exercises, yoga achieves the greatest miracle of a new human.

Key Words: Yoga, Christian perspective, God, contemplation and meditation.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Prayer is an integral element in all the religions. Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation *Nostra Aetate* emphasized the importance of keeping relationship with other religions. He says that "In the Church's relationship with non-Christian religions, she considers what is in common and what brings fellowship. Man is united on the deepest of questions from existence of himself, to that of other things which he cannot fully comprehend."¹ In Christianity prayer is the fundamental aspect of faith. The three stages of prayer in Christian tradition are vocal prayer, meditation and contemplation.¹

Today we see a great interest in the Eastern methods of meditation, particularly *Yoga* and *Zen* meditations. Here there is integration of body into the prayer. *Yoga* is a group of physical, mental, philosophical practices or disciplines which originated in ancient India and different schools such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism practice it.²

The Christian God is a God of love which is beyond any barriers. The God in Jesus Christ always takes the initiative to love us. Throughout the Bible we see this attitude of God. At the same time our sinful nature is an obstacle to experience God. Will *yoga* pave way to reach our goal that is GOD in Indian philosophy?

2. Importance of yoga:

Prayer is an integral element of the Christian faith and permeates all forms of Christian worship. The most common and universal meditation practiced in *Yoga* is the "third eye meditation". Meditation is a quest.³ In common it is the recollection of the heart. The practitioner of *yoga* would ultimately be able to connect his soul with the world soul.

3. Historical perspective:

Iyengar writes, "The yogi does not look heavenward to find God for he knows that he is within. He feels the kingdom of God within and without and finds that heaven lies in himself."⁴ Jesus also said, 'the Kingdom of God is within you.' (Luke 17: 21).⁵ One should find the kingdom within oneself and cherish heaven.

The word *yoga* means union, and the goal is to unite one's transitory self with the infinite Brahman, the Hindu concept of God. This god is not a literal being, but is an impersonal spiritual substance that is one with nature and the cosmos. This view is called pantheism, the belief that everything is God because the *yoga* philosophy makes no distinction between man and God. *Yoga* originated with a blatantly anti-Christian philosophy, and that philosophy has not changed. It teaches one to focus on oneself instead of the one true God.⁶ It encourages one to seek the answers to life's difficult questions within one's own consciousness instead of the Word of God.

A Christian should exercise caution and pray for discernment regarding involvement in *yoga*. *Yoga* cannot be fully extricated from its spiritual roots in Hinduism and Buddhism.⁷

4. Can *Yoga* be practiced in Christian Life:

Christians are not called to empty the mind or to see the human body as a means for connecting and coming to know the divine. Believers are called to meditate upon the Word of God, an external Word that comes to us by divine. Most of the Christians are unaware that *yoga* cannot be neatly separated into physical and spiritual dimensions. The physical is the spiritual in *yoga*, and the exercises and disciplines of *yoga* are meant to connect with the divine.⁸

When Christians practice *yoga*, they must either deny the reality of what *yoga* represents or fail to see the contradictions between their Christian commitments and the logic of *yoga*. The true fact is that *yoga* is a spiritual discipline by which an adherent is trained to use the body as a vehicle for achieving consciousness of the divine. Christians are called to look to Christ for all that we need and to obey Christ through obeying his Word. We are not called to escape the consciousness of this world by achieving an elevated state of consciousness, but to follow Christ in the way of faithfulness.⁴

5. Elements of the Cosmos :

According to the Indian tradition, universe consists of five elements pertained to *yoga*. These elements are water, earth, air, fire and ether, in Sanskrit *Jalam*, *bhumi*, *Vayu*, *Agni* and *Akasha* respectively.⁹ God used these elements to reveal Him to us so that we could also reveal God through these elements. For example, Christ baptized in Water and He came out of it as a new Jesus Christ⁹. He came to the Earth to form us as one in body.⁹ His Spirit fills the body and unites it with father.⁹ St. Paul was encountered by Jesus as Light. God dwells in Heaven.⁹

6. Meditation:

Asanas create a certain meditative state of mind.¹⁰ It is a highly specialized technique gives concentration.¹¹ Meditation originates in Shamanic and Totemic period which was affirmed by the excavations of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, Indus valley cities that dated 3500 BCE sculptures. *Rig Veda* from 1500 BCE mentions long haired ascetics amidst hundreds of hymns sung by Gods and Goddesses layout the foundation for meditation. Indian system of meditation through *yoga* helps to dissipate *karma* and reaches to deeper self understanding and approaches a state of lucidity and purification. Christian views on meditation is that it integrates the inner self and united with the supreme God who blesses with all his virtuous as gifts to be entangled in one's life.¹²

Meditate etymologically originated from Latin *Meditare* means deep, continued reflection, a concentrated dwelling in thought.⁸ Meditation involves concentration, listening, thinking, feeling and awareness of God and Self. The purpose of meditation is to change one's life and progress in perfection. To do meditation one need to be silent not only outside but also inside. *Yoga* alone cannot bring this silence which creates emptiness within. Meditation is needed for a person to be united with and immersed in the blessings through heart and soul with God.⁸

Meditation is a universal spiritual wisdom and a practice found at the core of all the great religious traditions, leading from the mind to the heart. It is a way of simplicity, silence and stillness. It can be practiced by anyone, wherever we are on our life's journey. According to St. Teresa, "Mental prayer is nothing but friendly intercourse, and frequent solitary converse, with him who we know loves us."¹³ It is a discursive type of prayer which focuses the mind on a particular Gospel story or mystery of the faith. Through it, we probe the meaning of a particular belief and make it an integral part of our life. One can meditate on a scene from the life of Christ, the life of Blessed Virgin Mary or one of the Saints or a dogmatic truth such as the incarnation, resurrection, and ascension or a particular virtue or various prayers. It includes a period of preparation, some reflection on a particular aspect of the faith, an application of that reflection to our life, a resolution to do something about it, and a concluding prayer. Through this, we are able to consider 'in-depth' meaning of our faith and the relationship with absolute God.¹³

7. Contemplation :

Contemplation means entering into the dwelling place of universal man Jesus Christ. Contemplation derived from the Latin word - *Contemplatio* and Greek - *Theoria* which refers to looking at, gazing at, being aware of God or the Divine. The process of Christian conversion prepares us for the experience of God. Contemplation is a profound, loving, and hidden intimacy with the living God. The contemplative is the one who has a living experience of the God of Jesus, who is being emptied of one's egoism, pride, and the idols of the heart. Contemplation purifies the heart, and let oneself be loved by God.

The call to experience God is a call to grow in friendship and to surrender to Jesus in prayer. St. Teresa of Avila in her Interior Castle speaks of contemplation. She says that in contemplation we live the two commandments of love. The more we are advanced in loving others, the more advanced we will be in loving God. "We love others when we show care and concern for them, see their needs, and share what we have with them."¹⁴ The more we have emptied

ourselves of self, the more we are able to recognize the value of others. We can give strength and comfort to others when we maintain a respect and love for self as an extension of God's image.

8. CONCLUSION:

Yoga is practiced merely as a physical exercise by all humankind. But in Hindu religion it is part of their prayer and meditation. The five elements are God for them, for Christians, they are created by the creator, the God.

Yoga cannot be fully extricated from its spiritual roots in Hinduism and Buddhism. Christians are not called to empty the mind or to see the human body as a means of connecting to and coming to know the divine. Believers are called to meditate upon the Word of God that comes to us by divine revelation and not to meditate by means of incomprehensible syllables.

Yoga cannot be neatly separated into physical and spiritual dimensions. The physical is the spiritual in *yoga*, and the exercises and disciplines of *yoga* are meant to connect with the divine. Like different denominations in Christianity, different schools of *yoga* exist in India. *Yoga* theory and practice forms an integral part of Indian religion. *Yoga* speaks to the person as person and not specifically as Indian, African, Japanese and European and made relevant to any human situation.

The philosophy that imbues *yoga* is deeply religious and exercised by a few Christians in America. Christian *yoga* would more accurately describe as syncretism. This is an attempt to combine two or more contradictory beliefs into a new religious system.

Hinduism is pantheistic and teaches that god is in everything, i.e., 330 million gods, plants, animals, and every human being. So to salute the divine in another person makes sense to a Hindu. Christianity, teaches that God is transcendent and eminent distinct from His creation. A Christian seeks to be united with a personal God to achieve salvation by entering into heaven while *yogi* strive to achieve *samadhi* in which his Self finds liberated from bondages. The Christian puts emphasize on faith and grace whereas *yogi*, on effort and insight. Each tradition looks different, incomplete and strange from the point of others. However, the practices of *yoga* in Christian prayer and meditation help us to go for inter-religious dialogue which is the trend and need of the hour in India.

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