



“How I pray is breathe”: Yoga, Christianity, and Healing

MARY HINKLE SHORE

When my husband told his Evangelical Christian mother that I was practicing yoga, she asked, “The exercise kind or the religious kind?” She wanted assurance that I had not begun drifting toward new-age spirituality, ancient Hindu practices, or some other worship of false gods.

Sara Shore is not alone in her concern. Imagine this scene: a room full of people stand on yoga mats, each with feet together and the palms of their hands touching in prayer position at the solar plexus. The teacher asks students to dedicate their practice to something bigger than themselves. “We’ll send out that dedication,” she adds, “on three Oms.” The group exhales together, inhales together, and then intones, “Om,” three times. The practice begins. During the next sixty minutes, students move in sync with each other through a series of physical poses. At the end of the hour, after a time of meditation with students lying on their backs in corpse pose, the teacher directs students back to a seated position on the mat. The class ends with the teacher and students raising praying hands to the middle of their forehead, bowing to one another and offering each other the Sanskrit salutation, “Namaste.”¹

¹Translations of “Namaste” range from, “Greetings,” to, “I bow to you,” to something more like, “The divine in me honors the divine in you.”

Can yoga, a complex religious system in its own right, function as a form of Christian prayer? In many ways, yoga and Christian faith offer strikingly different worldviews. Christian practitioners, however, need not work to “Christianize” yoga. They can simply use it, in Christian freedom, for its real benefits without taking it more seriously than it deserves.

What has just happened? For Christians, the scene raises the question of whether yoga is inextricably bound up with the worship of something or someone other than the God of Israel known to us in Jesus of Nazareth. Is “Om” an invocation? Of whom? Is the dedication a way of interceding for others? To whom is the dedication sent? Is the class comparable to synchronized swimming or to corporate prayer? If it is prayer, can Christians and non-Christians engage in such devotion together?

Imagining a second scene brings an additional set of concerns into focus. We leave the room with all the yoga mats and return to the reception area of the studio. In that space, all manner of things are for sale. Students, who listened to a teacher counsel nonattachment just moments before, now find that clothes, mats, yoga vacations, and private lessons can all be theirs with the swipe of a credit card.

Perhaps the clearest indication that yoga has become part of mainstream America is the estimate from *Yoga Journal* that, in 2007, spending on DVDs, books, clothes, classes, and other items related to yoga was nearly \$6 billion. The magazine’s 2008 “Yoga in America” market study reported that 15.8 million people (6.9 percent of U.S. adults) practice yoga.² Nearly three-quarters of that number are women, and almost as many are college educated. Forty-four percent have annual household incomes of \$75 thousand or more.

These statistics raise a different set of questions from those of my mother-in-law, yet questions that are just as vital for Christians to consider as they decide whether or how to practice yoga. Given the *Yoga Journal* study’s numbers, idolatry in the context of yoga practice may have less to do with Hindu devotion and more to do with the self-absorption that characterizes much quasi-yoga spirituality, with the glorification of beauty and youth it encourages, and with the misplaced love for and trust in consumer goods that yoga shares with almost every pastime in America. To oversimplify only slightly, is yoga as it has come to be practiced in the United States just one more way for rich women to remain preoccupied with themselves, insecure about their bodies, and overindulged in terms of their wardrobe? If so, would not such a practice be fundamentally at odds with the dual vocation of Christians to love God and neighbor?

Even as many Christians are skeptical about how yoga and Christian commitments may coexist in devotional practice, others are embracing yoga for its capacity to heal the body, calm the mind, and center the spirit. Along with offering after-church blood pressure checks and scheduling weekday walking groups, parish nurses in Christian congregations now arrange yoga classes in church basements and Sunday school classrooms. In these settings, yoga functions as both an avenue of Christian prayer and an alternative therapy for a variety of medical conditions. Asthma, anxiety, depression, diabetes, heart disease, back and joint pain, weight gain in later life: the list of ailments that yoga has been shown to mitigate

²Dayna Macy, “Yoga Journal Releases 2008 ‘Yoga in America’ Market Study,” *Yoga Journal* Press Releases, 26 February, 2008, http://www.yogajournal.com/advertise/press_releases/10 (accessed 18 October 2009).

and often heal is varied, and the positive results of practicing its breathing and stretching exercises are increasingly documented with more than just anecdotal evidence.³

Can yoga function as a form of Christian prayer, or is it by definition an alternative spiritual path?

What sense can we make of all this? Is the healing associated with the practice of yoga something like the work of the unknown exorcist about whom Jesus was less concerned than his disciples (see Mark 9:38–40)? Can yoga function as a form of Christian prayer, or is it by definition an alternative spiritual path?

In this article, I engage these questions first by reviewing the basic claims of classical yoga philosophy and contrasting them with basic Christian claims in order to show the significant differences in these two approaches to union with the divine. Next, I assess attempts to “baptize” yoga, as it were, by those who point out the places in the New Testament where Jesus sounds like a yoga guru or who commend the Lord’s Prayer or other parts of the Christian tradition as accompaniments for the practice of moving in and out of yoga postures. Finally, I suggest that, in spite of the limitations of yoga’s religious truth claims, a yoga practice is one way Christians may embody the type of prayer that is simply breathing.⁴

YOGA: YOKING WITH THE DIVINE

People who know nothing else about yoga are fairly sure it involves bending one’s body into the shape of a pretzel. “I’m not flexible enough to do yoga,” they say, which to a yoga practitioner sounds as reasonable as, “I’m not thin enough to cut my calories.” There is a relationship between yoga and physical flexibility, but it is not the one many assume. What is more, the physical postures of yoga are only a small part of the ancient practice.

Yoga is a complex religious system with sacred texts, respected teachers, reports of mystical experience, and a particular theory about the self in relation to the divine. The Sanskrit word “yoga” means yoking or union. Classical yoga developed as a means by which to realize one’s union with all that is. Americanized yoga is often focused on physical strength and flexibility, and body image motivates people to try it. Yet classical expressions of yoga can sound almost antagonistic toward the body, since the union of spirit to Spirit is the goal. The practice of moving

³Larry Trivieri, *The American Holistic Medical Association Guide to Holistic Health: Healing Therapies for Optimal Wellness* (New York: J. Wiley, 2001) 363–381, 420–421, cites double-blind medical studies and their results as evidence of yoga’s effectiveness as treatment for several of these conditions.

⁴In the interest of full disclosure, I add here that I have practiced yoga regularly during the last four years and continue to do so. I experience it as offering no more temptation to idolatry than any other part of daily life that includes cool gear, and I have my own stories of physical and emotional health and healing as a result of spending an hour a few times a week breathing and moving mindfully. At the same time, my experience of humanity as well as my confession of Jesus as Lord continue to make me skeptical about any promises of union with the divine that rely on human self-discipline.

through postures is meant to quiet the mind and thus prepare the practitioner for meditation that itself aims to move one beyond any sense of individuality or physical (bodily) presence or boundaries. As Sarah Strauss reminds us, “Originally yoga was a philosophically grounded set of practices designed to facilitate spiritual enlightenment, and it was mostly considered the domain of Hindu men. The practice of yoga in ancient India...had as its purpose the control of the body in service of the release of the spirit.”⁵

For students of Christian theology, such devaluing of the body in favor of the spirit calls to mind Gnostic forms of Christianity present in the second century and beyond. In fact, Swami Rama’s summary of yoga philosophy positions it squarely within the realm of religions aiming to offer knowledge, or *gnosis*, to humanity that will set humanity free from ignorance and illusion.

The central teaching of yoga is that man’s true nature is divine, perfect, and infinite. He is unaware of this divinity because he falsely identifies himself with his body, mind, and the objects of the external world. This false identification, in turn, makes him think he is imperfect and limited, subject to sorrow, decay, and death because his mind and body are subject to the limitations of time, space, and causation. Through the meditative methods of yoga, however, man can cast off this ignorance and become aware of his own true self, which is pure and free from all imperfections.⁶

“Once the individual achieves this state, she lives in the world, takes delight in its wonders, but remains detached from its attractions and allurements.”

The “meditative methods” Swami Rama refers to are the eight “limbs” that the Indian sage Patanjali described in the *Yoga Sutras*, a sacred text dated around 500 B.C.⁷ The hierarchical, progress-based system begins with ethical restraints and disciplines and advances to physical postures (*asanas*) and breath regulation. After these, come withdrawal from sensory experience and progress through levels of meditation that culminate in the experience of participating in cosmic oneness or “pure consciousness of one’s real self,” as Ashok Kumar Malhotra puts it. Malhotra continues, “Once the individual achieves this state, she lives in the world, takes delight in its wonders, but remains detached from its attractions and allurements. This state is designated variously as that of bliss or happiness; of sorrowlessness or fulfillment; of salvation or total freedom.”⁸

⁵Sarah Strassus, “Re-Orienting Yoga,” *Expedition* 46/3 (2004) 33.

⁶Swami Rama, *The Royal Path: Practical Lessons on Yoga* (Honesdale, PA: Himalayan Institute Press, 1999) 2–3.

⁷Patañjali and Ashok Kumar Malhotra, *An Introduction to Yoga Philosophy: An Annotated Translation of the Yoga Sutras* (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001).

⁸*Ibid.*, 9. For a quick description of the eight limbs, see Mara Carrico, “The Eight Limbs,” *Yoga Journal*, <http://www.yogajournal.com/basics/158?page=2> (accessed 25 October 2009).

Popularizations of this yoga philosophy run more along the lines of the subtitle to Baron Baptiste’s *Journey into Power: How to Sculpt Your Ideal Body, Free Your True Self, and Transform Your Life with Yoga*. “It may sound too good to be true,” Baptiste writes about his subtitle, “but if you work the principles in this book, I guarantee you will journey into power in every area of your life. Your body will transform, you will change your destructive patterns permanently at a cellular level, your mind will be infused with life and equanimity, and your relationships will be truer, deeper, and more fulfilling.”⁹ Classical yoga’s emphasis on gnosis and on the practitioner’s effort is still here in Baptiste’s conditional statement (“if you work the principles in this book...”). Now, however, the outcome is no longer stated as flight from attachment to matter and toward union with the divine but rather as a sculpted body and a happy life.¹⁰

CHRISTIANITY: “WE LOVE BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US”

One looks in vain in the *Yoga Sutras* for the concept of union with the divine as gift or grace. How do you get an awareness of union with the divine? The same way you get to Carnegie Hall: practice, practice, practice. Classical yoga is a set of physical and mental disciplines, the persistent practice of which leads the self to mastery of the body and mind and on to union with pure consciousness. It is true that in yoga the individual’s divine nature is understood to be reality whether one realizes it or not. To realize it, however, and to live out of the freedom and honor that divinity offers, one must, by one’s own understanding and effort, systematically eliminate distraction.

Christianity, by contrast, maintains that one cannot and need not do so. Patanjali is surely right that distractions, as well as other manifestations of what Christianity calls *sin*, do threaten to separate us from the divine. Because we are so consistently distracted by things that point us in a direction away from life, humans routinely do harm to ourselves, to our neighbors, and to our home, the earth. We kill and we die, which was never the way life was intended to unfold. Since the divine intention was for life and not death, and since humans are not just distracted by death but enthralled by it, God intervenes.

Christians confess that, in Jesus of Nazareth, God intervened graciously and decisively within history on the side of life. Jesus healed sick people, raised the dead, welcomed children, and ate with riffraff. This insistent embodiment and sharing of God’s life was bound to clash with humanity’s fascination with death and life’s destruction, and it did. When his death was imminent, Jesus said, “No

⁹Baron Cormon Richard Baptiste, *Journey into Power: How to Sculpt Your Ideal Body, Free Your True Self, and Transform Your Life with Yoga* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002) 11.

¹⁰This review of yoga philosophy could lead to the misunderstanding of yoga as defined by self-absorption at the expense of the neighbor’s good. While either yoga or Christianity could be practiced that way in error, each does have within it concern for the neighbor. In yoga, this concern is most clearly articulated in the five ethical restraints (*yamas*) that largely parallel the second table of the Ten Commandments. See Aadil Palkhivala, “Teaching the Yamas in Asana Class,” *Yoga Journal*, http://www.yogajournal.com/for_teachers/984 (accessed 4 November 2009).

one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). He refused to take up arms or call others to do so in his defense. In the end, he was killed, the victim of betrayal, slander, and state-sanctioned violence. As we look at Jesus' life and death, Christians confess that we are witnessing the union of the human with the divine. We witness the union of divine and human also as God raises Jesus from the dead, as if to say to the rest of us, "What part of 'life' don't you understand? How can I make it clear to you what side of the death/life question I am on here?"

IRONIC HEALING

For people who want to sculpt an ideal body, free a true self, and transform their lives, Christianity—with its insistence on the cross as the clearest revelation of what the true human/divine self looks like, its proclamation of transformed lives as free gift given for the good of the neighbor, and its testimony to a resurrected body that comes sculpted with nail wounds—is fundamentally ironic. Any borrowing from yoga on the part of Christians will occasionally bump up against these ironies.

This may be the reason that even though I share the desire of some yoga practitioners to offer a Christian defense for yoga, I am uncomfortable with the identification of *asana* practice, breathing exercises, and yogic meditation as forms of Christian contemplative prayer. Examples of this type of defense include Nancy Roth's *An Invitation to Christian Yoga* and Thomas Ryan's *Prayer of Heart and Body: Meditation and Yoga as Christian Spiritual Practice*.¹¹ Roth is an Episcopal priest and Ryan is a Paulist priest. Both bring to their work on yoga years of study in Christian theology and in other religious traditions, and both offer carefully argued defenses of yoga as a way for Christians to practice embodied prayer. They invoke the doctrine of the incarnation to argue that even as God became flesh in Jesus Christ, so God is fundamentally concerned with the redemption of our bodies and with their use as vessels of prayer. Independently of each other, these authors set Sun Salutation A, a flowing series of yoga postures, to petitions of the Lord's Prayer.¹² This approach of seeing points of contact between yoga and Christianity and understanding the practice of yoga postures to be a way of Christian prayer is helpful to some who wonder whether it is possible for faithful Christians to practice yoga. For those who wish to explore the approach further, I know of no better introduction to it than the materials created by Roth and Ryan.¹³

¹¹Nancy Roth, *An Invitation to Christian Yoga*, rev. and updated ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2001); Thomas Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body: Meditation and Yoga as Christian Spiritual Practice* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995).

¹²Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body*, 153, says of the combination of Sun Salutation A with the Lord's Prayer, "I had come to this on my own and have been teaching it to people the last few years. When I discovered it similarly illustrated in Rev. Roth's book, I was surprised and pleased to know others have been working in the same way with yoga postures and Christian prayer."

¹³Roth, *An Invitation to Christian Yoga*, includes a DVD demonstrating yoga poses. Ryan has produced a DVD separately titled *Yoga Prayer: An Embodied Christian Spiritual Practice* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2004).

I confess, however, that the approach leaves me cold. Something about it seems too tidy, perhaps, as if Christians doing yoga could be content to paper over substantial differences between the two religions in favor of finding common threads in humanity’s search for God. The cross, with its manifestation of God’s foolishness and weakness, is a mystery of the Christian faith that does not have a parallel in yoga. Furthermore, I am drawn to yoga precisely because it allows me to pray without words. I wouldn’t change that even when the words suggested are as worthy of repetition as those of the Lord’s Prayer.

the cross, with its manifestation of God’s foolishness and weakness, is a mystery of the Christian faith that does not have a parallel in yoga

Finally, I think the overlay of Christian rhetoric is unnecessary to legitimize yoga as a practice for Christians. In an essay titled, “Day of a Stranger,” Thomas Merton writes:

This is not a hermitage—it is a house. (“Who was that hermitage I seen you with last night?...”) What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe....Up here in the woods is seen the New Testament: that is to say, the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it.¹⁴

This is the mystery shared by yoga and Christianity: “how I pray is breathe.” Breathing is the center of yoga practice. It is more important than movement or alignment. When breathing is prayer, Christians are perfectly free to breathe through yoga postures and staff meetings, through conflicts with family members and first dates, through hymns and songs on the radio.

What do Christians need to practice yoga? In addition to a mat and a teacher who knows how to help students not to hurt themselves, I suggest two other things: antennae for religious claims that seem unreliable (also known as a crap detector) and a sense of humor. If something seems wrong or dangerous to you, don’t do it. The best teachers will tell you that you are your best teacher, and in the case of what your body, mind, and spirit need from a yoga class, as well as many other things, this observation is completely accurate. The suggestion that new clothes—even new yoga clothes—will lead to a new self is likely flawed. You know that without anyone telling you. As for chanting or other more explicitly religious practices, you may choose to chant “Om,” which is not so much a name for God as the imagined first sound or vibration, or you may choose to be silent as others around you chant, or you may choose to find a class where no chanting happens. About idol meat consumption, the Apostle Paul said, “We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow be-

¹⁴Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, rev. ed., ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1974) 433.

come a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Cor 8:8–9). It is good advice with respect to a yoga practice as well.

The sense of humor will help ease embarrassment when you tip over. It will also protect you from worrying too much about whether your yoga practice or anything else in your life is actually helping to sculpt your ideal body, free your true self, and transform your life. The amazing thing about yoga, and the reason people like parish nurses commend it, is that so much healing happens through yoga apart from effort to make something happen. Mindful breath combined with movement pushes all sorts of reset buttons in our bodies and minds. Occasionally, when one of my teachers sees someone in the class working very hard to “achieve” a pose, she reminds us, “It’s just yoga.” Christians, especially, have the luxury of knowing that our eternal salvation, as well as everything else that really matters, is assured by the one who created, redeemed, and sustains our life in Christ Jesus. This is true quite apart from whether you can ever balance on one foot. Tip over boldly. You don’t have to take anything, least of all yoga, so seriously. ⊕

MARY HINKLE SHORE teaches New Testament at Luther Seminary. She has trained as a yoga instructor and practices at Core Power Yoga in Minneapolis.