

Sects and Cults

Yoga

Do you want to improve your golf score, find a cure for alcoholism, develop muscle control or sharpen your memory? Master yoga, say thousands of North American yoga practitioners, who claim wondrous results. In the Western world, some of the yoga practices appear relatively harmless. Some see yoga as a means to find calmness of mind and bodily stillness through special breathing techniques, gymnastic exercises and various other psycho-physical meditation methods. For many Westerners the word yoga is connected with acrobatic feats, sword-swallowing, lying on spikes, crystal gazing, being buried alive, snake charming and so on.

Is yoga just an innocent meditation technique that leads to mental and physical improvement? Yoga has been practiced in India for thousands of years as a vital part of Hinduism. The word yoga itself literally means "union." In Hinduism yoga is a means of freeing and unfolding the personality and uniting the spirit of man with the supreme and absolute creative spirit of the universe. Indian thinkers view yoga not as an innocent physical exercise or meditation technique, but as an introspective or meditative practice for the discovery of truth.

Many Westerners are so conditioned by the secular spirit of the times that they cannot grasp Hinduism's view of the oneness of the physical and the spiritual. The body and the spirit are ultimately one. The physical discipline of one's body, therefore, is considered to be an essential step toward union with the divine. Gopi Krishna, an India yogi (literally a practitioner of yoga) says: "Enlightenment, therefore, is a natural process ruled by biological laws."

Indian scholars don't think too kindly about Hinduizing Westerners. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, an Indian scholar and journalist, believes that certain things in Hinduism, e.g., yoga, have become a religious substitute for many people in the West after they lost their Christian roots. He says: "In the present enfeebled state of Western life and culture, the so-called Hindu spirituality has become a mirage to lure those Europeans who have become so de-vitalized that they feel the Western heritage of religion, ethics, and intellection as an unbearable burden."

Yoga practice takes different forms. Some scholars list at least six. The six yogas are: Jnana yoga, or the path that leads to spiritual enlightenment through knowledge; raja yoga, or the path of realization through meditation, involving the practice of certain mental exercises and observing the effects of them on one's spiritual condition; karma yoga, or the path of union through one's good deeds; bhakti yoga, or the path of realization through love and devotion to a personal deity; kundalini yoga or the awakening of the sleeping powers in man. The word kundalini literally means the coiled up. Divine energy remains unmanifested within us, and to the yogis it has a form like that of a coiled serpent. Pat Means, in *The Mystical Maze*, defines kundalini as "a form of yoga in which 'serpent power', or occult powers residing at the base of the spine, are summoned to the brain through certain yoga techniques. This endows the practitioner

with superhuman psychic and spiritual powers which lead to samadhi or enlightenment." Hatha yoga literally means "forced union" and stresses the control of the body. It is based on the assumption that enlightenment can be physically achieved. Physical health is its principle objective.

All the six forms of yoga have been expounded in Hinduism's sacred Scripture - the Gita - as methods of attaining union with God. Each one of the yogas is seen as an independent path to God and when the end is attained, all six seem to join together in one. We read in the Gita:

Whatever wish men bring me in worship,
That wish I grant them. Whatever path men travel Is my path;
No matter where they walk It leads to me.

Hatha yoga is the form of yoga best known in North America. Its practice is used to achieve physical and emotional wellbeing. In this system there are literally hundreds of different postures. It is accompanied by the counsel to be moderate in eating, drinking, sleeping and recreation. (This is always good advice of course!) In mass marketing of hatha yoga in the West, the "oneness with God" is greatly de-emphasized. It is presented as a neutral "exercise eastern style." Journalist Arthur Koestler observes that the impression given in the West is "that Hatha yoga is merely a superior system of gymnastic exercises, designed to relax the body and mind by adopting a suitable posture, a natural way of breathing, and thus to facilitate a meditative attitude. At the same time, it is usually denied that there is anything 'mysterious' or 'occult' about its doctrines." But he points out that "in fact, every Indian-born practitioner of Hatha yoga, from the Himalayan hermit to the Bombay insurance clerk who spends an hour a day at a yoga institute, knows that Hatha yoga does promise the attainment of supernatural powers; and he also knows that every posture and exercise has both a symbolic meaning and physiological purpose related to the tenets of ayurvedic medicine, and is not considered a fit subject for discussion with foreigners."

What are some of the claims of India yoga practitioners? Swami Prabhavananda says that some have obtained such powers as clairvoyance, clairaudience, thought-reading, telepathy, and others getting such powers as becoming invisible, of levitation, of walking on water and the like, According to Indian yogis claims, Christ's miracles - such as walking on water, turning water into wine, feeding a multitude with five loaves and two fishes, healing the sick and even raising the dead - are no exceptions. The yogis say that they can "be performed by every man provided he follows certain practices, and the principal apparatus for testing the validity of these claims is the mind cultivated by the practices of concentration and meditation."

Well known are the hatha breathing exercises. Yogis have on occasion demonstrated an amazing mastery over their physical bodies, slow their heart beats, reduce their oxygen consumption, etc. Swami Prabhavananda warns that these breathing exercises should never be practiced without previous instruction from an adept teacher. He comments: "I am certain that those who write indiscriminately of yoga breathing

exercises do much unintentional harm. For these exercises are dangerous to the beginner without proper personal guidance. Furthermore, it is my opinion that the many varieties of breathing exercises taught by hatha yogis are dangerous even when practiced under the supervision of teachers skilled in hatha yoga. They may sometimes aid in building the physical body, but they just as often injure the brain. There are instances in India, to my personal knowledge, of men who have become mentally unbalanced by such practices. Unfortunately, an interest in breathing exercises that go by the name of yoga has been created in America by irresponsible authors and teachers."

Should a Christian practice hatha yoga? This system of exercise is not as innocent as it appears at first glance. In Indian thought it is a way that leads to "enlightenment" - to union with the absolute. We don't need to resort to Hindu oriented practices for the improvement of our health, our golf score or the power to remember! Our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor. 6:19). They should be treated as such.

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