

YOGA

A consideration

I. INTRODUCTION

Many people are attracted to the practice of yoga to help them de-stress and create for themselves a sense of well-being and peace, or to 'work out' using a system of non-violent exercises to tone muscles, become supple or to lose weight, unaware of the spiritual teaching from which it is derived.

The British Wheel of Yoga describes yoga as a system of philosophy that originated in India and offers a holistic approach to body, mind and spirit. Simple breathing techniques are taught to develop awareness and relaxation of the breath. These are then developed into **pranayama exercises**, which are the controlling and moving **prana** through the breath. **Prana** means the vital or 'life force' energy. Some of the British Wheel of Yoga teachers try to include history and philosophy in their yoga classes to help their students understand how the yoga they are doing fits into the original spiritual context and to help them become aware of subtle changes in their approach to life. (www.bwy.org.uk)

Yoga has also been described as a unique type of exercise whereby every time a practitioner steps onto the yoga mat he/she is connected to and becomes part of an evolving and powerful tradition because yoga is the ultimate exercise and method of self-improvement and enlightenment. (www.triyoga.co.uk)

2. THE ORIGINS OF YOGA

At least 4,000 years ago the early yogis of Northern India formulated practices for people to achieve and maintain a state of balanced existence by various disciplines including meditation, study, self-enquiry, chanting and **hatha yoga**, the form of yoga most widely practised in the West today.

UPANISHADIC Hinduism had a variety of its own techniques for coming to awareness which were often called 'Yoga' or union since it yokes or joins one to divinity. Yoga can refer to physical (**hatha**), mental (**raja**), sexual (**tantra**) or other disciplines to achieve enlightenment.

The **VEDAS** are the oldest Hindu scriptures, written by the Aryan conquerors of India around 1500 BC. This material is mostly written from the perspective of the **Brahmin** priests and tells them how to offer sacrifices, or comments on this. Many **mantras** or prayers come from the Vedas.

The **UPANISHADS** followed the Vedas and form the second layer of Hindu scriptures written from the 9th century BC to the 1st century AD. Yoga **gurus** composed these books to teach their methods of meditation, breathing and exercises.

More recently Sage Patanjali has penned the ancient Indian heritage of Yoga through his treatise 'The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali' which is a study consisting of 196 sutras. In the present century Yogacharya BKS Iyengar has translated from the **Sanskrit** the following 'Invocation to Sage Patanjali':-

OM *'Let us bow before the noblest of sages, Patanjali, who gave yoga for serenity and sanctity of mind, grammar for clarity and purity of speech, and medicine for perfection of health. Let us prostrate before Patanjali, an incarnation of Adisesa, whose upper body has a human form, whose arms hold a conch and a disc, and who is crowned by a thousand-headed cobra.'* www.iyengaryoga.org.uk

Glossary Of Terms

Asana, the term used for the physical exercises practiced in **hatha** yoga. They not only stretch ligaments and exercise muscles but are designed to influence currents of subtle energy within the body, (see **prana** and **ch'i**). In the cross-legged lotus and perfect postures, for example, the lower body gradually loses sensation and ceases to exercise a disruptive influence on the mind, making these **asanas** ideal for meditation.

Atman – **Sanskrit** for 'breathe', is a Hindu term for the individual soul, which was never born and never dies but appears in body after body through reincarnation; it refers to the universal soul from which all individual souls come. The **Upanishads** teach that **Atman** is **Brahman** and **Brahman** is **Atman**, thereby explaining their monistic

understanding of the oneness of god and the individual soul.

Brahman – In Hinduism, the impersonal ground of all being, being itself, from which every other object gets its being. **Brahman** is the name of the first of the three chief deities.

Chakras - in Oriental yoga and Western magical thought are energy centres which exist within the human aura for the purpose of absorbing, transforming and distributing the universal energy of **prana** or **ch'i**. There are seven main chakras: the root chakra, located at the base of the spine; the sacral chakra, located in the sexual-genital region; the navel chakra or solar plexus; the heart chakra; the throat chakra; the frontal chakra located between the eyebrows; and the crown chakra, located at the top of the head. The term **chakra** itself means 'wheel' and is used because the centres appear to spin when viewed by clairvoyant sight.

Ch'i - in Chinese esoteric and medical thought is a universal energy generated by the sun and utilised within the human body. Manipulation of this energy, which manifests itself into the negative/positive polarities of yin/yang forms the basis of medical acupuncture. Control of this energy is also involved in Chinese yoga and some branches of the martial arts such as Tai Chi.

Guru – Hindu term for a spiritual leader, teacher, or master.

Hatha - **Ha** equals moon, **tha** equals sun.

Hinduism – the dominant religion in India: though it has many sects, no central dogma exists. It includes believers in pantheism, polytheism, agnosticism and atheism. Most Hindus believe that the world is an illusion (**maya**) which is overcome by enlightenment. **Reincarnation** and **Karma** are common ideas.

Karma - is a Hindu term for the law of cause and effect, that whatever a person does in this life will inexorably be repaid either in this life or another incarnation.

Kirtan - refers to chanting, one of the main practices of yoga. Classic Indian instruments accompany the chant while **Sanskrit** mantras are repeated in a call and response fashion bringing about a stilling of the mind and an opening of the heart.

Mandala - is a **Sanskrit** term for 'magic circle'. Usually it is a circle but it can be a square divided symmetrically into 4 (or its multiples) sections. Some forms of yoga meditate on it to focus the attention on a single point and empty the mind.

Mantra - is a short word or phrase from Hindu scriptures that is repeated many times. One goal is to empty the mind to dispel **maya**. Others claim that repeating the mantra raises one's vibration levels and unites a person to the gods.

Maya - the Hindu belief that the external world is an illusion and that one overcomes this illusion by yoga and attaining enlightenment.

Meditation - is the core practice of yoga, which it is said brings about the full awareness of our true nature; its ultimate fruit goes beyond the body and the mind, to connect us with a deep sense of inner awareness and fullness – our inner Self.

Nirvana – In Buddhism – the state of absolute blessedness, characterised by release from the cycle of reincarnations and attained through the extinction of self. In Hinduism – a similar state in which reunion and oneness with **Brahman** is attained through the suppression of individual existence, and in which one no longer has desire, passion, or the delusion of **maya**.

Prana - **Sanskrit** for 'breath'. According to Hinduism this is the breath or life-force. It also refers to the breathing exercises in yoga which are meant to teach one how to absorb the life-force.

Reincarnation – the belief that after death one's soul returns to earth in another body. (See **samsara**).

Samsara – this is known as the wheel of reincarnation; because people have had bad **karma**, they have to return to earth repeatedly in new bodies. The goal is liberation from the physical world and absorption into **Brahman**.

Sanskrit – is the literary language of ancient and medieval India, the grammar of which was fixed before the fourth century B.C., and is now used for sacred or scholarly writing. It is the language of the Vedas and of Hinduism.

Siddha - is a type of yoga which teaches its students how to get psychic powers like levitation, flying in the air (actually, hopping while in a seated position) and speaking in tongues.

Sutra – a short pithy saying or a brief statement of principle.

Transcendental Meditation - considered to be a **siddha** yoga that uses repeated mantras. *The mantra is either the name of a Hindu deity or is designed by its vibrations to invoke one.* It is also known as the Science of Creative Intelligence. Transcendental Meditation is really a religion and not just a technique as is claimed. After instruction there is an initiation ceremony in front of a shrine where the candidate removes his shoes and with lighted candle and burning incense makes an offering of fruit, freshly picked flowers and a snow white handkerchief and is then given his personal mantra. A hymn is chanted in **Sanskrit**.

Yoga – Hindu system of philosophic meditation and asceticism designed to effect reunion with the universal spirit; system of physical exercises and

breathing control used in yoga. (Definition from The Pocket Oxford Dictionary.

Yogi – one who practices, teaches or is a master of yoga.

3. TYPES OF YOGA

There are ten different types of yoga traditionally recognised as valid paths to the goal of spiritual enlightenment.

HATHA YOGA is the most common form of yoga practised in the West. It emphasizes the development and control of the physical body to such a degree that it no longer interferes in any way with the mind's search for enlightenment.

DHYANA YOGA comes close to the Western religious practices of contemplation and meditation, a purely mental discipline often involving trance states.

JNANA YOGA is the yoga of knowledge and calls for an understanding of the sacred **Vedas of Hinduism**, notably the **Upanishads**, which contain a great number of esoteric doctrines, and in which a person receives enlightenment through meditation on the knowledge of **Brahman** and in realising that everything is **Brahman**.

KRIYA YOGA is concerned with religious observance and the proper carrying out of ritual acts.

MANTRA YOGA, although sometimes inaccurately described as a yoga of spells, is actually a yoga of sound using chants and **mantras** in order to drive the mind to a higher state and attain enlightenment. The mantra is a short word or phrase from Hindu scriptures.

BHAKTI YOGA is defined as the way of love, devotion and faith. These elements are usually directed to particular gods and union with **Brahman**. The most popular form of Bhakti yoga in America is the Krishna Consciousness Movement, devoted to the god Krishna.

KARMA YOGA is the way of good deeds, work or effort, usually expressed as charitable acts and works for the needy.

LAYA YOGA is a system specifically concerned with the activation of the chakras, and, like certain Western magical systems, uses specific sounds, namely **mantras**, to awaken them.

KUNDALINI YOGA is a comprehensive teaching of exercises, breathing, meditation and mantras introduced to the West by Yogi Bhajan as 'the mother of all yogas'. It is specifically concerned with arousing the serpent power of kundalini at the base of the spine by meditating to draw the power to the top of the head, through various points called **chakras**,

increasing one's level of enlightenment at each stage. Many Hindus consider it a dangerous form of yoga that can bring illness or death unless used by well-trained gurus.

RAJA YOGA is known as the King of Yoga, sometimes even the King of Kings of Yoga. It is considered to be the highest form of yoga and is familiar to most New Agers as a system of right thought, mind control and physical exercises in which the soul understands itself clearly, and a person is aware of his or her own inner divinity and is united to **Brahman**, the ground of all being.

4. THE CHRISTIAN & YOGA

The physical exercises of yoga cannot be separated from the mental process. The initiators of the yoga courses are the yogis who are trained in the yoga of Hinduism and whose ultimate goal is to lead the students on to Indian yoga. The external physical, breathing and relaxation exercises will lead to further exercises to attain self-knowledge and the technique of controlling mind and soul in order to become superhuman. The yogis believe in themselves as gods, having personal deities such as Krishna and Shiva and that the powers received in yoga ultimately come from the Hindu universal spirit, Brahman.

The Christian understanding is that God created all things (Gen 1:1); that he said, *"I am the Lord your God ... you shall have no other gods before me"* (Deut.5:10); *"Be still and know that I am God!"* (Ps. 46:10). Jesus tells us that He is the way, and the truth and the life. *"No one comes to the Father except through me."* (John 14:6).

In Hindu teaching, God is impersonal and not separate or distinct from creation, a concept which has long been identified with Eastern religions, and that to escape from the cycle of reincarnation into the 'bliss-consciousness' of the impersonal god, the goal of mantra yoga, the meditator tends to come to a conclusion about the impersonal nature of God. The Christian, on the other hand, comes to know God as a Person through prayer and reading the Bible. In the gospels one learns that Jesus Christ is called the divine Word, the Son of God, and that he taught his disciples to talk to God as Father in simple, rationally connected words as in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13). He specifically rejected repetitive verbal exercises like using a mantra as a means to God when he said, *"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words."* (Matt.6:7)

Yoga practices have been connected with occult powers and magic since their origin in ancient India as is evident in the traditional yoga textbooks, which promise the student supernatural powers (**siddhas**) as an accompanying feature when they progress along this path. Mircea Eliade, a well-known authority

on yoga, writes 'In India a yogi was always regarded as a Mahasiddha, one who possessed occult powers, a sorcerer.'

There are many Christians who say that they practise Christian Yoga, replacing the mantras with Christian words and prayers such as the Lord's Prayer and who recommend these exercises as a neutral technique. However, the origin, method and goal of yoga is a form of **self**-redemption through the practice of physical and mental exercises to raise the practitioner higher and higher in order to attain inner-divinity and **self**-redemption.

A Christian will never knowingly turn to unknown mystic teachings or magic formulae, to elemental forces of the universe and foreign gods, or exercises to learn the art of emptying the mind to discover his divine self or to attain redemption; neither will he associate with a belief in karma or reincarnation, both of which form part of the teachings of Hinduism.

The Christian scriptures explain, '*This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*' (John 17:3); that salvation is not earned or worked for, but that it is a free gift, '*Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.*' (Rev.22:17); and that there is only one way to peace, as foretold by the prophets in the Old Testament and proclaimed in the New, '*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*' (Luke 1:78-79); that the only way to salvation is through Jesus, (Col. 1:15-20), '*God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*' (Col.1:20). The Bible also warns against those who deny that the divine fullness is to be found only in Christ, '*For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.*' (Col.2:9-10).

The Lord challenged the people of Israel to choose between life and death and the same is true for us today. Do we choose a path leading to other gods as in the practice of yoga, or do we follow the teachings of Jesus? Yoga is not advertised as having a spiritual dimension. This document is to raise this awareness and to enable people to have the information to make that choice. In the words of St. Paul, '*See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.*' (Col.2:8).

5. CONCLUSION

In using techniques of breathing and posture, the effort is made to heighten awareness and consciousness. Through concentration it is seen as a pathway to enlightenment. Through detachment it endeavours to achieve a state of well-being, a loss of self-identity and absorption into what is termed the 'absolute' or 'ultimate being'.

Yoga literally means a 'yoking' or 'joining'. The word Yoga comes from Yug which means to join – a process by which the individual can supposedly be united with the absolute.

Yoga is primarily concerned with feelings and the aim of many practitioners is Samadhi – 'sleepless sleep'.

R.C. Tachner claims "*The highest state a yoga can reach is detachment from the world and from God as he abides in his own essence alone*". (Hinduism Oxford University Press; 1966; pg 72).

The Christian derives his identity from the affirmation that man is made in the image of God and God is a personal Father who calls us by our name and who knew us in our mother's womb. The potential intimacy of human beings with their Creator is manifest in the encounter with Jesus Christ, who is at the core of our life.

Countless techniques have been devised throughout human history which undermine this relationship. The constant danger of these techniques is to assume that God is distant or even non-existent and that He is silent. For the Christian, God is very near and speaks. For the Christian, God breathes His personal Spirit deep within our being, identifying our human need, weakness and sin and bringing us forgiveness and freedom through the life, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world.

Over the years many have searched for God through experiences such as Yoga and have sought in vain. Sometimes they have become confused. Often they have separated from God who wishes to have the central place in their lives. In some respects Yoga is a substitute for contemplative prayer.

When Christians experience God in prayer, they hear Him saying "*Be still and know that I am God*". He alone brings us peace, tranquillity and purpose in life.